

**Sermon – Sunday, August 13, 2023**

**Deacon Martha**

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him...

It was probably a decade ago that I mailed each of my three sisters, blank white sheets of paper with instructions on how they were to be used. Trace your right hand and your left hand, making four of each, label (R) and (L) and write your first name on them, then mail them back to me. I'd like to recall that I was gracious enough to include a self-addressed stamped mailer since I was doing the requesting, but I can't say that is true.

When I received all of the tracings, I added my own, cutting out each of the handprints and pairing them. Punching a hole in each palm and using a gold fastener, the four-sister hands were clasped together. A set of each went to my siblings.

Life circumstances kept the four of us from gathering together frequently, with too brief reunions celebrated from time-to-time. My notion of "holding hands" felt, to me, like a faithful connection that could be easily viewed as our attached cut-outs fanned out on the wall in a special corner of my room.

In today's Gospel, Mathew shares the story of the stormy sea and Peter's disembarking from the boat where his companions remained, presumably, to keep the boat afloat and remain as safe as possible midst the waves. As Peter begins to falter and sink, rather than walk on water, we read and hear, Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

Take just a moment to ponder this scene. Jesus reaches out to Peter, immediately. He didn't first rebuke Peter for a lack of faith or question him; rather he saw that his friend was in trouble, and he extends a helping, saving hand. The human hand of Jesus, one that could sense hot and cold, could drive a nail, that could bleed, that was always raised in prayer, that could bless, hold and be held. And, the Divine hand of healing, mercy, compassion, justice.

I ask you now to take just a moment to examine your own hands. Think of the myriad things you've done with them: washed dishes, changed a flat, driven a tractor, dug in the soil, kneaded bread dough, shoveled snow, held a broom, dribbled a basketball, played an instrument, operated machinery, changed a diaper, written a lesson plan, texted a friend...our "ordinary" hands have no doubt done a great many things.

Now, climb into the boat with me and explore how it might work to the greater good with "all hands-on-deck".

Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side...perhaps after experiencing the horror of John's beheading and the exhausting, miraculous picnic for 5,000, it didn't take too much coaxing for the disciples to get into the boat as Jesus told them to do. Regardless, this close-knit but diverse in disposition community, climbed into the vessel and set off. Jesus didn't just send his followers out into the depths to struggle on their own. He was going to meet them, be available on the journey.

Matthew's gospels are interested in community; the body of Christ in the world, what it means to be the Church. From early on in the Christian community the boat has been a symbol for the church. Doesn't it seem a great symbol for the church because it takes a large number of people, doing diverse things to get it to move, to set sail? "Sailors" cooperate and working in communion, performing the duties that coincide with God-given gifts and talents, allow the ship's mission to be accomplished.

It sometimes happens that all hands aren't on deck. For whatever reason, people "jump ship" and set off in another direction. "Lord, if it is you", Peter says, "command me to come to you on the water." I wonder, and maybe you do too, why Peter decided to leave the others and pursue such a thing? Perhaps Jesus was asking himself the same question, as he tells Peter, "Come."

One source says that walking on water has come to be synonymous, even outside the church, with the idea of stepping out in boldness, taking risks. It seems safe to say that Jesus wants us to take risks for the sake of the gospel. And of course, he wants us to keep our eyes focused on him and his mission and to have the gift of faith. Certainly, many good works have been and can be accomplished on one's own; yet in keeping community, staying on board, striving together despite differences and because of the giftedness in differences, how much more fully can the re-creation of the kingdom be realized a bit at a time?

Over the years, I have been blessed to share Bread and Wine with a multitude of people receiving Holy Communion. Held out in anticipation of receiving nourishment are eager, young hands, gnarled, arthritic fingers, work-scarred callused palms, newly manicured or nervously bitten to the quick fingertips, one hand, the other lost in battle. Most often there is at least a brief touch, and while there isn't a lot of time to think about it, I do feel a sense of awe as I regard the disciples and prophets, all of us sinners and saints, at the Altar and the connection that adds to the dimension of this mutual meal.

Though seemingly mundane, the day-to-day stuff that keeps our hands busy, hanging laundry, making the bed, stirring the sauce for supper, fixing the mailbox post, our jobs and vocations that contribute to the smooth sailing of family and others who benefit by our offerings are things for which to give thanks. They matter.

Hands doing the bidding of the heart (we heard in Romans, that the word is there) that keep communities and individuals afloat, I think, may be the Divine. The collect bids that we are granted the spirit to think and do the things that are right. The words of the psalmist are some of my favorites: mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Do we believe this happens and help to make it so?

Fingers tying knots to bind up those whose faith is faltering, hands clasped in prayer, a thumb slick with the oil of Unction or Chrism making the sign of the cross, gripping a pen or tapping computer keys to sign a petition promoting justice. Gripping a ladle to fill the soup bowl of the Child of God, waiting in line at the mission, planting a tree or garden, scooping trash from the

stream...Myriad are the ways we may use our hands, our gifts, to be faithful to our Baptismal Promises. It is in community, together, exploring with care the depths, the channels, and the currents that bid us come. With trust, hope, courage, and love, faithfully believing in the power of the hands that hold and guide us, let us together make this world a better place than we found it.

Amen.