

“Being Held in Wounded Hands”  
April 25, 2010

Acts 9:36-43  
John 10:22-30

You may not realize it, but church is a dangerous place ... or at least it's *called* to be a dangerous place. Mix an openness to the Spirit with love, trust, and vulnerability, and a truly dangerous community can emerge. Dangerous to the status quo, dangerous to our carefully-honed sense of self and our carefully-tended protective armor ... dangerous to our reputations.

Why, just last week, here at this church, at the last meeting of the group that had been journeying with Gerard Manly Hopkins, the discussion moved from general thoughts and reactions to the end of that particular 40-day journey, to specific experiences with one of Hopkins' poems of gentle intimacy, to different kinds of intimacy in our lives, to our profound need for touch and this culture's uneasy relationship with that basic human need.

One thing led to another, and before you could say, “Gerard Manly Hopkins” three times, there we all were, the thirteen of us, standing around the tables in the Community Room, rubbing each other's shoulders. There we were, in a conga line that had replaced conga-ing with shoulder rub-bing. And as those moments of caring touch kept going, I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed that no one from outside the church was witnessing this phenomenon. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed that no one would be spreading the word in town that at the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ, they ... *touch* each other. From what I hear, there are already a number of folks in town who wonder if this is a Christian church, and I wonder what they would be thinking and saying if they had witnessed that shoulder-rubbing extravaganza.

And all this ... this reaching out, this risking a certain intimacy, this laying on of hands was happening when, unbeknownst to the group – at least I *think* it was unbeknownst – all this was happening when the lectionary readings for the next Sunday also have hands all over them. All this reaching out and touching each other with finite, human hands just a few days before we're invited to encounter the imagery of Psalm 23 – “You prepare a table for me before my enemies and anoint my head with oil.” All this reaching out with our hands just a few days before we hear the story of Peter taking the disciple Tabitha by the hand to help her rise from her death bed. All this reaching out with our hands a few days before we hear the story of Jesus in the temple, proclaiming that no one can snatch his followers from his hand.

It's enough to make a person wonder, “Is there some sort of Spirit alive and at work at the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ?” Indeed, all this is enough to make at least one person – this one – give thanks and gladly say, “Oh, yes, there is a Spirit at work here, and ain't it grand!?!”

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Hear again the story of Jesus in Solomon's portico on a winter's day. While Jesus is walking in the temple, some people approach him and say, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answers by reminding his

questioners that he *has* told them but they haven't believed him. Then he explains, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I will give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

"No one will snatch them out of my hand." Those who follow me, can hear me, and no one can snatch them out of my hand. Jesus' words in this story and Paul's words in his letter to the Romans echo one another, weaving a tapestry of promise and blessing. In Paul's description, in this fabric of God's faithfulness, "neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ." As Jesus describes it, in this fabric of faithfulness, those who hear him and follow him will be forever held in his hand.

It's a *familiar* metaphor – being held in the palm of God's hand or Jesus' hand. It's a *comforting* metaphor, at least at first blush. But let's play out the rest of the story, the rest of *Jesus'* story. Let's remember the events we commemorated just four weeks ago during Holy Week. Let's remember what happens to Jesus' hands, to the hands in which his followers are invited to reside, "safe and secure from all alarms," in the words of an old hymn.

After this winter's moment in Solomon's portico, Jesus will continue to teach, preach, and heal. He will continue to embody, to *incarnate* a God whose love knows no bounds and whose commonwealth is the one where the last are the first and where God *blesses* the ones whom the *world* despises. After this scene in the Jerusalem temple, Jesus will continue to be a threat to the religious and political authorities who use their power to serve themselves instead of serving God's vision of Shalom, of justice, compassion, and peace.

And then Jesus will be betrayed (in Greek, literally "handed over") and arrested. His hands will be tied, and, finally, he will be nailed to the cross. His hands, the hands with which he has offered healing to so many and in which he says he will hold his followers forever, will be pierced with the nails of crucifixion. And then, after the first Easter, it will be those same now-wounded hands that Doubting Thomas will insist on seeing before he will believe that Jesus is risen.

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Hear again what Jesus is saying in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John. No one will snatch those who follow me from my hand. I will hold them forever in my hands, my hands that are themselves forever wounded. It's a very different image, a much more incongruous metaphor, than the image of being held by the strong, capable, unwounded hands of a young carpenter.

And here is the scandal of Christianity, the gift of the Christian story to a world enthralled with power – raw economic, military, cultural, and political power. The scandal Christianity proclaims is that the only lasting power, the only source of everlasting blessing and life ... is vulnerable love. Christianity dares to proclaim that the fullness of God, the fullness of life itself is available only through vulnerable love, love that can be and is wounded by betrayal and rejection. Christianity is so bold as to proclaim that God's love is vulnerable love and the holy hand that can hold us forever has risked unimaginable vulnerability and has the scars to show for it.

Instead of offering a vision of a god removed from human life and suffering, instead of offering a vision of a distant deity that set everything in motion and watches

what we do with this life with detachment, maybe even with indifference, the Christian story suggests that the greatest holiness, the sacred source, the god beyond names and beyond naming is most visibly, tangibly, powerfully present in wounded hands that reach out in steadfast love and forgiveness.

Vulnerable love. Wounded hands and a wounded heart. These are the offerings of the God made known through Jesus. These are what we find when we let Jesus hold us in his hand where no one can snatch us away. Yes, there have been and there will be times when some of us and perhaps all of us would prefer the promise of a love that could keep us safely removed from vulnerability and hurt. Sometimes we may wish for some of the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, the gods who are strong and powerful and can smite our enemies.

But if we look to Jesus and the Christian story, what we find is vulnerable love, wounded hands, and a wounded heart filled with love, blessing, and compassion. If we look to Jesus and the Christian story, we find that the sacred heart of the universe can take in our own heartaches. We find that the love at the center of life is a vulnerable love that can take in our wounds and our woundedness. We find that what Christians know as God in *Christ* is seeking to be God in *us*, moving us to embrace one another with wounded hands and to love one another with hearts that have known great joy and deep pain.

Jesus says, “No one can snatch them out of my hand.” That hand in which we are invited to find our rest, our home, our life is a hand that shares the sorrows of human life. That hand in which we’re invited to find abundant life is a hand that knows the pain of human life. That hand in which we can dwell forever is remarkably like your hands and mine.

God in Christ comes to us, not to tell us how removed we are from God and God is from us. God in Christ comes to tell us that we, too, can be one with God, with the source of life and love itself. God in Christ comes to tell us that we, too, can reach out in love, forgiveness, and compassion with wounded hands.

And now I want to invite you to take a moment and look at your own hands. Take a moment and imagine seeing the joys and the sorrows of your life somehow written on your hands. Take a moment and imagine that in and through those sorrows and joys, God is fully present, bringing love to you and through you.

And now, please take a moment and, with the touch of your hand, offer the peace that passes human understanding to your pew mates on your right and your left. Take a moment to offer your own humble, wounded hands to those around you with the blessing of love and peace.

Reach out in love, so this church will be a dangerous place, place where we honor the presence of God in all of life and where we dare to follow that presence wherever it may lead us.

Amen.

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