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February 4, 2018  
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Isaiah 40: 20-31  
Psalm 147:1-11  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1: 29-39

## **“The Hands of Love”**

The Thursday morning Women’s Study has been reading *The Book of Joy* by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. In the chapter on compassion, the Dalai Lama tells of his experience on an overnight flight from San Francisco to Japan. Seated near him were a couple with a three-year-old toddler and a baby. Both parents did their best to keep the children occupied. But the Dad eventually fell asleep and the Dalai Lama notes the mother’s swollen, exhausted eyes as she continues to care for the two tired and cranky children herself. He writes, “I thought about it and I don’t think I would have had that kind of patience.” He names this type of self-giving love as compassion. The narrator of the book further observes, “It probably takes many years of monastic practice to equal the spiritual growth generated by one sleepless night with a sick child.” The same can be said about caring for a sick parent, sick spouse or sick friend.

I have been praying for a number of caregivers this winter as the flu, colds and tummy bugs go through households like bowling balls, knocking one member down after another. Like many of you, I know from experience that it is terribly difficult to be patient, gentle and awake for what feels like a life time with a sick loved one -especially when you are exhausted and ill yourself. Yet, we do it - isn’t that what love is about?

Re-reading the familiar Gospel passage appointed for this Sunday, I thought of those caregivers and this sentence jumped out to me, “Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her hand and lifted her up. Then, the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” The vision of her hands cooking and serving the men sprang immediately to mind. Well-trained feminist theologian that I am, my first response would usually have been: “of course she did – serving men is what gave women of the time their identity in family and society.” But this time round, my response was very different. “OF COURSE she did -that is what the hands of love do.”

It is interesting to note that the word “serve” is simply a choice of the translators. In the Greek text, the same word has already appeared once in Mark’s Gospel - when Jesus is resisting temptation in the desert the angels “minister to” him. In today’s passage, this same Greek word is translated as “serve.” The use of the same word twice in 31 verses is a clue that something

deeply holy happens as Jesus lifts up Peter's mother-in-law by the hand. His healing of her calls her "to minister to" Jesus and his friends; and probably also to the crowd on her doorstep waiting for Jesus to heal them. This passage visually describes the chain reactions of being ministered to and ministering to others as a result.

I am struck by the detail that Jesus heals through his hands. Hands fascinate me – since I was a little girl I have watched people's hands. Hands are the first thing I usually note when I meet a new person– I had a friend in college who told me I should deal cards for a living because I could recognize people by their hands. I am also enchanted by the works of people's hands – needlework, knitting, painting, cooking, sculpting, piano playing, clock-making – if it can be done with our hands, count me in.

That said, it comes as no surprise to me that the very first thing I noticed about worship at St. Matthew's was that we all hold hands as we pray following Children's Time. When you stand in the middle of it, you feel the power of it – but you don't see it. I spend a lot of worship time in the back or the front of the congregation – and the view of all of those hands connected by the Spirit of love almost always makes me tear up. Hold that image in your mind's eye as we dig a bit deeper into our Gospel reading for this morning.

Jesus has come from the synagogue where he has taught with authority to the bedside of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Rooted in his faith community, he crosses the threshold into the intimacy of a household of those whom he knows - and reaches out his hand to "lift up" the mother-in-law of his friend. Rooted in the healing Jesus' extends to her, she in turn, uses her hands to "minister to" those she knows – Jesus and his disciples. At sundown, when the Sabbath has ended and work can be done again, Jesus crosses the threshold from the intimacy of the household into a crowd of strangers outside the door. As he steps into the crowd, hands reach out to him and Jesus reaches back to them with healing hands of love. The next morning, he sets out to pray by himself and is then joined by his intimate friends and they set out to minister to those beyond the boundaries of synagogue, family and place. The chain reaction of ministry continues on the journey through Galilee.

Jesus moves from the space of worship to the intimacy of home, to the world beyond the threshold, then to private prayer and back into intimate community in order to go out again to minister to those near and far. This is an important pattern. And at St. Matthew's, we follow that pattern in ways we might not even be aware of. You can see it in our hands.

We gather in intimate community to worship each Sunday. We hold each other's hands in prayer and then we reach those healing hands to others. We pray individually and collectively as we minister to others, then return to this beloved community where we share our experiences and refresh our souls.

When I look at us holding hands as we pray, I also see the many ways in which those hands are connected to those to whom we minister in places near and far. I feel the rhythm of being ministered to and then ministering to others. We, too, are part of the chain reaction of ministering.

Susan LaSante will soon be heading to Kenya to minister to the children served by the Slum Foundation. Many of our hands have sorted the flash cards she will take with her. Other hands have made yummy treats to sell today so that Susan will be able to give our gift of money to support work that our friend George's hands do with these children. This is what the hands of love do.

Through the ministry of Pam Follet's medically trained hands in school and clinic in Tanzania, our Prayer Shawl ministry has learned that it is possible for children to die of exposure even in hot climates. The works of their hands making hats, booties and prayer squares are put into the hands of laboring mothers – and on the heads and feet of newborns. This is what the hands of love do.

Nikki Matsaruka's hands will be ministering to girls in Zimbabwe later this year. She will arrive with hands full of sewing machines and fabric to make sanitary pads so that girls can stay in school. The work of many hands at St. Matthew's is gathering the fabric and material Nikki will need, and many hands have already made and sent sanitary pads. This is what the hands of love do.

The shopping cart sits in front of our altar this morning. Many of our hands have filled it with food for those in our community experiencing food instability. Following the service, some of our hands will pack these gifts and deliver them to the local food pantries. This is what the hands of love do.

Our Immigration Team comes to worship this morning having just yesterday shared the work of their hands in food and program to educate and empower those who minister for justice in our congregation and our wider local community so that, in turn, we can minister to those searching for home and community. This is what the hands of love do.

16<sup>th</sup> century mystic and Carmelite nun, St. Theresa of Avila expresses the Christian calling well:

Christ has no body but [ours],  
No hands, no feet on earth but [ours],  
[Ours] are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world,  
[Ours] are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
[Ours] are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

[Ours] are the hands, [ours] are the feet,  
[Ours] are the eyes, [we] are his body.  
Christ has no body now but [ours],  
No hands, no feet on earth but [ours],  
[Ours] are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but [ours].

The hands of love minister in so many ways in and through St. Matthew's community - from the gift of the flowers on the altar to the Festival of Sharing -we hold each other's hands as we anchor ourselves in one another's prayer so that our hands may reach out into the wider world. Every time we worship together and hold each other's hands, we participate in the chain reaction of being ministered to and then ministering to others. This is the rhythm of Jesus' loving compassion moving through us. This is lived Christian practice as old Jesus' ministry and as new as our own. This is what the hands of love do. Amen.