

Connecting with God: hands and feet

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I've mentioned before a young man named Harley who was active in my church in Corpus Christi. He didn't look like your typical church goer with his tattoos and piercings but he was very devoted to Jesus. On his hands, he had letters tattooed on each finger so that they spelled out SERVE JESUS. He did that to remind himself that whatever his hands were doing should correspond to those words. The tattoos are not my style, but he was onto something with the concept.

We're continuing this week to explore our connection with God through the common things of life, some of those things are right in front of you: hands and feet, your own and those of the people in your life.

Human hands play a big role in the Christian faith in conveying the grace of God to us. One of those ways is the laying on of hands to commission people to do God's work. From kings and prophets in the old Testament to Paul's commissioning of leaders and missionaries in the early church, the Bible is full of that sign conveying God's call and the spiritual support that goes with it. When I was ordained, a bishop laid hands on my head and said "take thou authority to proclaim the word of God and to lead the church of Jesus Christ." When Zachary Moore and Nadine Anaclet were confirmed in this sanctuary a few months ago, I laid hands on their heads along with their mentors and families and said, "receive the Holy Spirit to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ." All Christians are commissioned to carry on Jesus' work in the world.

Unfortunately, too much attention is paid to preachers and bishops and not enough to the ministry of all Christians. That's not the way it's supposed to be. In our scripture reading, the early Christian community in Jerusalem is growing and the distribution of food to poor widows has gotten uneven. Tensions are developing between Jewish-born and Greek-born Christians, so the apostles call the community together and ask for help: they need a team to handle the serving of the food while they continue the preaching and teaching. Seven men are chosen, and—here's the important part—they stand before the apostles who pray and lay their hands on them. The importance of the work of serving is signaled by that laying on of hands. And I promise you, no matter how eloquent the preacher is, a caring community is crucial to bringing people into a church and taking the church's ministry out into the world.

So serving is another important way we connect with God through hands and feet. Jesus' hands healed people, fed them, drew small children onto his lap, washed the feet of his disciples. Think of all the hands that serve here this morning: hands that join in prayer or welcome people, nursery workers holding babies and SS teachers doing crafts with children, hands that direct the choir and play the organ, that take up the offering and see to the lights and run the sound. And beyond Sunday morning, the hands of our people who volunteer with the homeless and with schoolchildren, drive seniors to their doctor's appointments, hands that dig in a community garden or set up

an apartment for a refugee family. God uses your hands in your jobs, in your care for family, in your neighborhood.

Our feet connect us with God when they go into unfamiliar territory to make connections with others. On Monday at the march for Martin Luther King Day, I met a woman who said she had never been to a march before. "I just felt like I needed to be here this year to show my support, because there's been so much ugliness." God was working through her. Sometimes our feet take us very unwillingly to a hospital room where there's been a scary diagnosis, or a house where there's been a death. "I won't know what to say," we think, but that's okay—your feet are doing the work to get you there just to be present, to listen.

Years ago when I was a pastor in San Angelo, the 16-year-old daughter of church family was diagnosed with cancer, a tumor in her head, behind her cheekbone. The treatments were so intensive that they just wiped her out, and one night she got so weak that her parents feared she wouldn't make it. The word went out to their group at church, and people began to gather.

It was late at night, no one around, so we sat on the floor in the hall near Vicki's room, where her parents were with her. It was so quiet that we could hear the swish of the elevator doors when they opened and hear footsteps drawing closer, and then we would see another familiar face coming to be a source of love and prayer and support. Vicki survived, recovered—but the sound of those footsteps is what I think of when I hear the verse, "How beautiful are the feet of those who come to bring good news of God's love."

Our hands and feet are often where our faith comes down to earth to connect with people outside our usual circles and that's a crucial connection. Traditionally on Holy Thursday, there is a foot-washing in the grand Basilica of St. John's Lateran in Rome, and for centuries the Pope would choose 12 priests for this ceremonial washing in remembrance of Jesus' action. "In 2013, just 10 days after his election, Pope Francis stunned the world and broke with tradition by traveling to a juvenile detention center outside Rome, where he washed and kissed the feet of twelve prisoners, including two women and two Muslims." (RHE 114). Traditionalists were shocked; Pope Francis completely got Jesus' point: when Jesus washed his friends' feet it wasn't a ceremony, a symbol—it was an act of humility and love directed toward ordinary people. It was not the act of a religious professional but a priest in the sense that we are all priests to one another.

There's something about human beings that loves hierarchy and categories: sacred versus secular, the morally upright and the questionable. God doesn't look at us that way. We're all beloved children and God blesses all of us through all the hands that touch us in love. When you think of loving hands, what comes to mind? The little hand of a child or grandchild, tucked in yours. Your mother's hand on your forehead when you had a fever, the calloused hands of a dad who could fix anything, the touch that takes your breath away when you're in love and keeps you growing old together.

Maybe it's the brother who puts you in a headlock when you wrestle or the friend who gives you a hug when you're down. God is present in every loving touch.

Love is the key. An old story in the Greek Orthodox tradition tells of a monk who was deep in prayer when he heard a knock at the door of his cell. He opened it to see Jesus, dressed in magnificent robes. The monk fell to his knees in adoration. He took Jesus' hand to kiss it, but then he stopped. He asked, "But where is the mark of the nails?" He looked up to see Satan unmasked, who promptly disappeared.

We know Jesus by the signs of his love in his hands and feet. That's important to remember in a world where many like to use his name or wear the cloak of religious faith; we have to ask "are their hands doing the work of Jesus"?

But, you know, we have to ask ourselves that same question. This week, let's watch what our hands do and where our feet take us because that will tell us something about what's important in our lives. And this week let us keep our eyes open to see God in the hands and feet of others.

Quotation from Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Henry Publ., 2015