

March 5, 2025 – Joel 2:12-19 & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Our hands are amazing creations. A feat of divine engineering, capable of intricate movements. Movements made possible by articulating joints between twenty-seven bones and using more than thirty muscles. Even the simplest movements are complex. Recent research has determined that the fastest accelerating part of the human body is not the blink of an eye. The snapping of your finger is actually twenty times faster. It takes seven milliseconds to travel from the thumb to the palm. Our hands are truly amazing.

But that's probably because our hands need to do so much. We use them for work, for sports, for crafts. In fact, hands are almost universally recognized as symbols of power and control. But, of course, the things that our hands do are ultimately not controlled by the hands themselves. And, really, they're not even controlled by our mind. Ultimately, the choice of what we use our hands for flows from the heart. Because it's from the heart that we decide whether our hands will be used to give or to take. To build or to break.

Jesus, in our Gospel lesson this evening, mentions hands. He says, *“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”* But this text comes to us from the Sermon on the Mount. And before we can tackle this passage, we have to go back to the beginning of this great sermon in chapter 5. As I was just saying this past Sunday, we need a little context – a little backstory – before we continue.

And the first thing we need to realize is that Jesus is addressing His disciples in this sermon. There's a great crowd listening in, but this is first and foremost a sermon for those closest to him. And one of the first things that Jesus says to his disciples comes from the Beatitudes, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Jesus is not saying this about someone else. About some hypothetical person who is poor in spirit. He is saying this about his disciples. They are the “poor in spirit.” Why? Because they have nothing to offer God. They come to God with empty hands. With impoverished spirits.

And Jesus fills them. He fills them with his blessings. He fills them with the treasures of his kingdom. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. For you too are a sinner and have nothing to bring before God to merit his blessing. And yet, Jesus has taken your sin to the cross and filled your hands with the gifts of His kingdom. The gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. In Christ, your hands are full because of what he has done to fill them.

So now we can jump forward to our text for this evening. And the first thing we notice is that Jesus says, “When you give to the needy...” It's not a question of if Jesus' disciples will be using their hands to help the needy or to do good for others, but when. The question is not, “Will we give to the needy?” The question is, “How will we give to the needy?” What does giving to the needy look like for a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Because Jesus quickly shows us that there are ways to give to the needy that are just plain wrong. Hypocrites who trumpet their deeds for the synagogue and the streets. They give to others only so that everyone else can see them and praise them.

And this is, honestly, pretty normal behavior in the world. People love to brag. They love to talk about themselves. To make everyone aware of their accomplishments. A few nights ago, we had the Oscars on television. What are the Oscars but a bunch of celebrities bragging about their accomplishments. Last night, was a presidential address to Congress. And as every president does when making a speech like that, President Trump took the opportunity to do a little bragging. It's just what our world expects.

We brag about everything. Including our generosity. The Jews did it in Jesus' day. We still do it today. We are creatures who are poor in spirit, depending on Jesus for every Gospel blessing. And frankly, we are just as poor in body, for every good thing in our hands comes from our heavenly Father's providing hand. We have nothing of our own. And yet we brag like we caused the sun to rise and the grass to grow and made our own way into heaven.

That's how the world operates. Now, you may be thinking, "I don't do that. I don't brag at all. I'm a humble person. I never talk about my own accomplishments. I never talk about how generous I am. I'm a Christian. I'm different from the world." And that may be true.

But as Jesus so often does in the Sermon on the Mount, he holds us to an even higher standard. He says, "*Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" OK, you're not outwardly a hypocrite, bragging to the world about your good deeds. But are you inwardly a hypocrite? Do you brag to yourself about how good you are? Can you honestly say you've never once been even a little proud of yourself for how generous and loving you were to your neighbor?

"*Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" That is a really high bar. To be so generous, so humble, so compassionate, that you don't even realize when you do something generous or humble or compassionate for your neighbor. It seems impossible.

And, in a sense, it is impossible. But only because of our sinfulness. Only because in our sinfulness we always keep track of our own goodness. We always keep a tally sheet in our hearts and minds of the good we have done. We are selfish, prideful, self-righteous people, even when we are trying our best to be selfless and humble and generous. Our sinfulness is so much worse than what we do or don't do with our hands.

For the real problem is not a problem of the hand, but of the heart. For "*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person,*" Jesus says. And it is this condition of the heart that condemns us to death.

And so it is that we are reminded this Ash Wednesday evening, "*You are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" We die because we are sinners, plain and simple. And if our lives were left in our own hands – as amazing instruments as they may be – the only reward that we would earn is God's judgment and wrath.

And yet we also heard this evening the words of the prophet Joel: "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.'" The recognition of sin is not merely something that we can take into our hands by an outward display of contrition. The crosses of ash I put on your foreheads are a perfectly fine outward symbol, but neither my hand placing it upon you, nor your feet bringing you up to receive it can save you from your sin.

David also knew this heart condition. As we read earlier in Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." David knew that he could not heal himself by the work of his hands. He needed the hand of the Lord. He needed the expert physician who is able to create a clean heart to blot out his own iniquities. To restore the joy of the Lord's salvation.

I said at the beginning of my sermon that the choice of what we use our hands for flows from the heart. Because it's from the heart that we decide whether our hands will be used to give or to take. To build or to break. But it is also from the heart that we realize the emptiness of our hands. It is from the heart that we recognize the sinfulness of our thoughts, words, and deeds. It is from the heart that faith clings to our Lord and the work of his hands for us.

That is why we are gathered this evening. Not simply to receive an outward sign of the cross on our foreheads. But to receive the gifts of Christ that bring life to our hearts. The gift of God's mercy and hope in the resurrection.

We rend our hearts this evening because we have received a clean heart and a right spirit within us. And we hold out these amazing hands that God has given us to receive an even more amazing gift from this altar. The gift of his Body and Blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of all our sins. Because in that moment, we who are so poor in spirit truly receive the kingdom of God. Amen.