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**Praying with All Our Gifts 1 John 1:1–4**

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The 15th-century artist Albrecht Dürer is perhaps best known for his exceptionally fine line drawing of praying hands.

Although there are many stories that surround this famous image, among the most poignant and powerful is this one: Albrecht drew the hands to pay homage to his brother Albert. He titled it simply “The Hands.”

Albrecht and Albert were *both* artists. They had both dreamed of attending the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg, Germany. But their father could not afford to send them. The two young brothers agreed to put each other through school. They tossed a coin and Albrecht won. He would go first, and Albert would go to work in the mines to support him.

When Albrecht completed his education, he would either go to work in the mines or, hopefully, earn enough from his artwork to support his brother’s education.

Albrecht finished school and his artwork was almost an immediate sensation. He was making a great deal of money. When he returned home, he toasted his brother Albert at a banquet with these words:

*“And now, my dear brother, it is your turn. You will go to the academy, and I will take care of you.”*

But Albert could not. He responded, *“No, brother, it is too late for me. The years of working in the mines have destroyed my hands. Every bone in every finger has been broken at least once. And now my hands ache. It is too late for me to make the delicate lines on canvas.”*

And so, Albrecht Dürer painstakingly drew his brother’s hands with palms together and thick fingers stretched skyward. “The Hands” was a tribute to his brother who had given him so much. The world opened their hearts to this masterpiece and renamed it “The Praying Hands.”

Like the Dürer brothers, those who are compelled to leave the world a bit better than they found it do so with thanksgiving and joy. They are often quiet, unassuming individuals. They are the ones taking care of others; the “behind-the-scenes,” practical, detail people who clear the way for others’ gifts to shine.

This story goes even further telling how the man who did for another found he could no longer do … what he loved … for himself.

Why does the image of the Praying Hands resonate so powerfully with us today?

Not only does its origin story provide background and depth to the popular social media emoji we use so frequently — hands clasped together in prayer — but it is also a metaphor that reminds us of those who form the backbone of communities, organizations, congregations. People who quietly go about doing acts of kindness and compassion; people who clear the way for others to do what they do best. They can be advisers or those who cheer you on. They are practical, down-to-earth folks who know how to quietly get done what needs to get done. They are the people who notice what we might mistakenly call “the little things.” The “little things” that make all the difference in a person’s life. And they are the people who still believe that *more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of* (to quote the great poet Tennyson) and know that it is the small steps that lead to accomplishing the impossible. They are truly disciples who follow the way of Jesus.

One such disciple was surely Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill, then presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, who in 1948 offered this challenge to his congregations:

*“How much money can we raise in an hour to address the suffering in the world?”* The desire was to show the power generated when Christians unite in a common cause.

Not long after the Episcopal bishop addressed his congregations, the Presbyterians accepted his challenge and eventually as many as 20 denominations joined the effort. In 1950, this challenge was named “One Great Hour of Sharing.”

The Offering’s original goal was $1 million to make the love of Christ real for individuals and communities around the world who suffer from the effects of disaster, conflict or severe economic crisis.

Today, the purpose of One Great Hour of Sharing has remained the same, responding to needs in 100 countries, including the U.S. and Canada. The last time it was reported the funds exceeded $20 million annually funded by eight denominations.

This season of Lent and the tradition of “One Great Hour of Sharing” combine to remind us that our faith is not only about the words we speak or proclaim or sing, but the Christian faith is a very human, relationship-building faith done in the name of God. Our faith is made real, and we are made real to one another, not by the abstractions of our theology, and not solely by our monetary gifts, but by the presence of God mediated through the meeting the physical needs of those who are hurting. People of faith have deep within them the call to service above self. We believe and know that we live our faith by responding to the call of our baptism. We are partners with God and with the whole people of God in renewing Creation. To accomplish that work, we know we are compelled to get involved, using those unique gifts we have each freely received, making a commitment to be a full member of the household of faith, and inviting others to join us.

One Great Hour of Sharing evokes images of “lending a hand” or “opening our hands.” Unfortunately, for many years, we used such terms as “handouts” or “a hand up,” which are classist and have no place in the faith community.

But for most of us, expressions like “lending a hand” or “opening our hands” are much closer to our experience of what it is to be church or community.

Most of us have people in our lives whom we count on to “lend us a hand” or “to open their hands.” Or perhaps they are folks who are described as “hands-on.” During the past three General Assemblies, there have been “Hands and Feet” Days when commissioners and visitors are invited to be actively engaged in the community hosting the PC(USA) General Assembly.

Such expressions aptly describe the posture, busyness and activity of what we believe we are called to do and be as Christ’s disciples.

As part of today’s message, I want to invite you to try this guided imagery\* about how we use our hands to convey information about who we are and how we interact with the world. *(\*This activity can be printed in a bulletin or projected on a screen.)*

Please repeat after me:

* *“Lord, here are our hands* … (outstretch your hands)
* *Put in deep pockets to keep them safe* (hands thrust into pockets)
* *Held behind our backs to keep them hidden from you* (hands placed behind back)
* *Placed over our eyes to blind ourselves to the need of others* (hands held over eyes)
* *Buried within sand where they are immobilized and useless* (fingers entwined and clenched, hands thrust downward toward the floor)
* *Patting ourselves on the back to take credit for all we are and do* (one hand exaggeratedly patting one’s own back)
* *Grabbing for the materials things in life* (both hands grabbing and clawing at imaginary treasures in the air)
* *Forever pushing you away* (both hands flattened, fingers splayed, one in front of the other with palms out, pushing upward as if to hold God at bay)
* *Lord, here are our hands* (hands together in prayer).”

What do these images cause you to think about or remember?

Any of the actions may seem like an exaggeration … but they illustrate how we go about our daily lives … and what we communicate with our hands, our bodies, our minds, our attitudes.

Images and metaphors related to hands and touching abound in the church. New Testament Scripture is filled with stories of Jesus reaching out his hand to bless and to heal. Our sacraments are visible acts of blessing and sharing. Our hands bless and welcome a new member of any age. Our hands share the Lord’s Supper. Within the gathered community, the spoken words and visible actions combine to communicate a shared meaning — our common language of God’s grace freely offered to all who believe and want to believe.

At an ordination, the act of praying and the “laying on of hands” is a powerful moment of affirmation given by the gathered elders to recognize and set apart for service those who are called by the voice of the people. The real focus of ordination is not the individual ordained but rather the community for whose benefit the person is ordained. It serves as a sign of the calling of all Christians to service of others. (*Sacraments as God’s Self Giving* by James F. White, p. 82)

Many years ago, in a speech to the national gathering of Presbyterian Women, Dr. Arthur McKay offered these words about discipleship: *It is a mistake for the churches to keep urging their members to contribute to this cause or that, in order to build the Kingdom. The aim of Christian (discipleship) is no more that, than it is to build up the churches. It is rather to exhibit, in loving and compassionate acts of service which minister to the needs of others, a response appropriate to the gospel.* (*Servants and Stewards* by Arthur R. McKay, p. 58)

The real test of discipleship is our love for one another. This test is a real problem for each of us and all of us. It’s not a measurable, tangible, quantifiable resource.

Jesus taught in parables and often used the imagery of touching or helping or responding. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that parables are *not* reports. They are not directives from a corporate entity. Most parables do not offer any interpretation; that is left up to those who have “ears to hear,” but in Matthew 25 we read about “crisis parables” that are followed with directions. In Matthew 25:35, Jesus provides a list. A precise and clear list of things we should have done, could have done, need to do in response to God’s love and grace. It is absolutely clear: As disciples of Jesus, our first duty is to love others.

It makes it quite challenging to be clueless or shrug our shoulders to say, “I didn’t know.” And who is the audience for Jesus’ words? Is it just the leaders? I don’t think so. It appears that the message is for all who have “ears to hear and eyes to read” — for all nations and all people of God. No more blaming the leaders. Because of our baptism and membership in the Body of Christ as disciples, we move from individuals concerned only with me and mine to discipleship with others ***for*** others. Our baptism makes us part of the household of God. As disciples, we are called to responsibility as we recognize the gift of grace freely given to us and freely received.

And we are never alone in this work of ministry and this journey of faith. We join with others and are surrounded with the sure and certain promise that God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is with us.

Let us pray:

God, we place our hands in yours.

Take them to use as you will.

No other hands can touch in quite the same way as ours.

God, hand in hand with you, we are:

Reaching out in love to others,

Inviting all to experience the abundant life,

Receiving much more than we give.

Dear God, alone our hands are weak, but together with yours they are strong. Amen.

(Sue Downing from *alive now*, March/April 1991)