Sunday, June 9, 1974
A SHOW OF HANDS
I Kings 19:3-5,9-16; Luke 12:16-21, 9:57-62

We've all been in meetings when the person in charge says, "Let's have a show of hands!" And hands go up all over the room. In school, the teacher will often ask the students to raise their hands. When one looks at the hands that are raised, it is quite a showing — big hands, little hands, rough hands, smooth hands, clean hands, dirty hands. You can tell a lot by looking carefully at a person's hands and I'm not talking about the kind of soap or detergent a person uses.

Some months ago, I was the guest preacher at a rural church and as I shook hands with the people after the service, I could tell that most of those present were farmers. The hands of the men were large and rough compared to mine.

Although I don't believe that much can be told about a person's future by the reading of one's palms, some clues can be had about a person by looking closely at his or her hands. A nervous or uptight person, one who is always clenching his fists and cannot relax will have different kinds of wrinkles and lines in his palm than a person who is relaxed and easy going. Thus, the lines in our hands do tell some things about our character and personality.

What a marvelous human instrument the hand is. Our hands can be trained to do such beautiful and helpful things. I think of the hands of a surgeon, or the hands of a concert pianist, or the hands of a baseball, basketball, or football player. We often hear a sport's commentator say — that per-son has a marvelous pair of hands.

In addition to all of this, our hands and what we do with them are symbolic of how we approach life and its problems. In these days when we seem to face so many kinds of problems in our country and in the world, there are a number of things we can do with our hands. Let's look at some of them.

1. First, we can wring our hands! The world is always full of hand wringers. These are the people who take their stand beside a wailing wall and moan, "Isn't it awful?" Alas, alas, the world is going to the dogs. Woe is me! It's just awful. There is not an honest person left anywhere.

Elijah, the prophet, at one point in his life became a handwringer. He was afraid and ran to hide in a cave and there he sat, wringing his hands. When God asked him what he was doing hiding in a cave, Elijah replied, "The world is coming apart at the seams, all is lost and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

We know the feeling. There are plenty of troubles all around us. In a recent column in the Saturday-Review-World, the editor, Norman cousins, pointed out that Watergate is not far from any one of us. Wherever one looks, he said, the evidence of an unraveling in moral fiber seems inescapable. Scandals involving police departments have erupted in at least a dozen American cities. We have to be vigilant in ways we have never been vigilant before. If a person stays at a hotel, he finds it necessary to double lock all the doors and to double check all the charges on his bill.

We face problems at every turn. Cousins said a colleague in the publishing business told him that he has had to warn his staff not to keep any valuables in desks, even when locked, because of an epidemic of office thefts. The same colleague went on to say that he didn't know which was worse, office thefts or the padded expense accounts turned in by top executives on his staff.

Recently in Nebraska, we've heard reports about meat packages being underweight at some meat counters.

But what can be done about it all? Just wringing one's hands over a situation has never accomplished anything but paralysis in all the time since history began.

2. Then we have the people who just fold their hands and I'm not talking about folding their hands in prayer. I mean folding their hands in a "I don't care attitude." That is easy. That is why so many people are doing it. What do the hand-folders care about what happens to the world? When confronted with immorality of any kind, their standard answer is "people have always been doing those kinds of things. So what!" And they sit back and fold their hand again. They are relaxing. They fold their hands over their generously proportioned stomachs and go into a coma.

Jesus had a warning for the "hand-folders" among us. In the parable of the rich fool, which was read as part of our scripture lesson, we have a picture of a hand-folder. That rich man wasn't worried about the rest of the world or anybody else. He was too busy folding his own hands over his own wealth. Since he ran out of space to store his goods, he tore down his present buildings and built bigger ones so that he could say to himself as he folded his hands in rest, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." But God said, "Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

So, it is with the hand-folder. He or she do not do much good for anyone.

3. A third things we can do with our hands is to put them in our pockets. Clench your fists and jam them down tight so that not even a wayward nickel or venturesome penny can escape and so that your hands will not be caught at helping anyone. Hands that are kept in our pockets are not much use in any task. But it adds to some people's security. It saves them from the temptation of some prodigal moment to give something to some cause or to take their hands and do something worthwhile with them.

The hands-in-pocket person is the tight-wad. He or she likes to stand around and complain and with their hands in their pockets in a death grip, they think they don't have to worry, they are secure.

But again, in the parable of the rich fool, Jesus is describing a hands-in-pocket tight-wad, and God says to all such persons — "Fool!"

4. A fourth category of the use of hands are those who are the "hand-droppers." These are those who say they are going to put their hands to a task and help out and then drop their hands leaving others to carry the whole load. Perhaps we've all had the experience of a person putting his hands to help with something we are carrying and then dropping his hands and not carrying his part of the load.

Jesus was talking about those who begin and then drop their hands in the third scripture passage for this morning. He was talking about those who promise to do something but then back down with various kinds of excuses. In this particular case, several persons had said they would follow him and become his disciples, and when Jesus invited them to come along, they backed down and dropped their hands. Jesus said of such persons, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Now I could do a little meddling here and apply this to persons who join the church and then drop by the wayside, or persons who make a financial pledge to the church and then find all sorts of excuses for not following through, or parents who have their children baptized and take certain vows and shortly after drop their hands and do not fulfill the vows.

But we don’t have to be handwringers, or hand-folders, or hands-in-pockets, or hand-droppers. There is yet another way to meet problems and opportunities with our hands.

5. We can lay our hands on some task. We can take hold somewhere and do something. Many of us become handwringers, hand-folders, hands-in-pockets, or hand-droppers because the problems around us look so large and unmanageable and thus like Elijah, we want to give up. The problems we face are large and often complex, but if we can’t do everything, we can at least do something. We can still lay our hands on some task.

For the Christian, this business of putting our hands to a task and accepting responsibility is especially important. It is our faith that as human beings we are trusted and valued in God’s creation. Thus, God has put much of our destiny into our own hands.

God has entrusted and empowered us as human beings working together, to choose our future. This is contrary to the common notion of leaving everything in the hands of God which often becomes a justification for doing nothing on our part — for folding our hands, or wringing our hands, or keeping them in our pockets, or dropping them by our sides.

Life is meant to be a dynamic responsible order in which every person has opportunity and responsibility for doing something which contributes to the whole. The wise person is the one who knows “the buck stops here.”

So, God expects us to lay our hands to a task. We are to choose wisely and decide responsibly. In every situation we can make a wise for a foolish choice. In every situation, we can help with our hands, or keep our hands to ourselves.

The “laying on of hands” has had a large place in Christian history. In ordination ceremonies, there is the ceremony of the “laying on of hands, “as persons gather around the one being ordained and place their hands on his or her head.

But the most important laying on of hands ever done happens when as a person or a group we lay our hands on a job that needs doing and do it. I hear there are plenty of jobs waiting for the laying on of hands. Amen.