Sunday, February 7, 1988
HOLDING HANDS
Mark 1:29-39

Text: Mark 1:31
"And Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them."

There are times when the simple act of taking someone's hand or holding someone's hand can make all the difference in the world.

When I had surgery a few years ago with a local anesthetic, one of the most comforting memories is that of a nurse gently holding my one hand between her two hands during the surgery while softly telling me about the progress of the surgery and reassuring me that it would soon be over. Her caring was communicated through her gentle touch and manner. I can still feel the warmth of her hands.

Jesus knew how important human touch is. The New Testament is filled with stories of Jesus reaching out with his hands to touch people and of people reaching out to touch him.

In the story read earlier from Mark's Gospel, Jesus had left the synagogue where he had been teaching and had gone to the home of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. When he got there, he was told that Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a fever.

We are not told what caused the fever. Maybe she was overly nervous because her two sons, Simon and Andrew, were bringing their teacher to her house for the first time. Perhaps she had been busy with feverish activity to prepare for the visit.

Even today, when someone has a fever, we are not always sure of the cause. Furthermore, we use the word "fever" or "feverish" to describe various types of behavior as well as a symptom of being ill.

It was Hippocrates who said he would rather know what sort of person has a disease than what sort of disease a person has. I think this was also true of Jesus. He wanted to heal not only the disease but to heal the person.

In the case of Simon's mother-in-law, "He took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her." We cannot overestimate the value of taking someone by the hand, holding hands, and the importance of human touch.

Perhaps you remember as a child when you were ill how good it felt to have your mother or father's hand take yours. Or maybe when you were overly nervous or afraid, you remember how good it felt to have someone hold your hand. There have been many times when the most important thing I've done in visiting someone in a hospital or nursing home has been to take the person's hand and hold it in mine as we talk or simply sit in silence or say a prayer.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, in his best-selling book Love, Medicine, and Miracles, underscores the value of human touch, especially between physicians and patients. He discovered that it not only helped the patient but helped him as well.

Here's part of what he said: "First I began hugging patients, figuring they needed my reassurance. Later I found I was saying, 'I need to hug you,' so that I could go on. And even if they were on respirators, my patients reached out to help me with a touch or a kiss, and my guilt, fatigue, and despair evaporated. They were saving me."

Reaching out with one's hand to hold the hand of another person can have amazing results. In kindergarten, we are taught, "When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together."

In his book, The Creative Years, Reuel Howe tells the story of Jane Foster and how holding hands helped her finally recover from a severe mental illness.

Jane had been a lovely young woman, and her parents had done their best to give her every advantage. She was most attractive and popular and had many talents. In her 21st year, she fell in love with a young man. On the eve of their marriage, she collapsed, and the ceremony had to be indefinitely postponed.

At first, it seemed as if she were simply exhausted and that a good rest was all that she needed. Her condition grew worse, however. She was depressed, made several attempts to take her life, and finally had to be taken to a mental hospital. Even there, she deteriorated until she would do nothing for herself, simply sat in a corner, day after day, looking at the floor, a pathetic contrast to the bright pixie creature she used to be.

Naturally, her family and close friends were shocked at this change in her, for which there seemed to be no explanation. The doctors talked to her parents, her fiancé, and others who might throw light on her case. But her condition remained the same— inert, sullen, silent. The weeks in which she remained in this condition passed into months, and the months grew into a year.

Toward the end of the year, Dr. Miller, superintendent of the hospital where Jane was a patient, began sitting for his portrait. The artist, George Duncan, encouraged Dr. Miller to talk about his work. One day Dr. Miller told him about Jane's case and confessed his sense of helplessness. "As in such cases, the person remains inaccessible. Nothing that we say seems to reach her; and she says nothing."

"What have you done to try to bring her out of wherever she is?" asked the artist.

"We've given her the usual treatments, but not even shock treatments have the expected effect on her. I've sent the chaplain in to see her, but she admits defeat."

The artist went on painting while the doctor continued to talk about the case. Finally, the artist put down his brushes with a remark about the failing light and asked if he might see Jane. They left the doctor's office and went down the long, lonely white corridors of the hospital to the room where Jane sat on the floor in the corner. The artist stood on the threshold, looking at the young woman, who seemed more dead than alive — a human being whose spirit had departed, leaving only a mechanically breathing body. All signs of animation and creativity were gone, and only hopeless isolation remained. Jane was the complete embodiment of despair and defeat, a condition that, on occasion, we all experience partially.

The artist stood there for a moment, looking at the young woman. Then he moved slowly toward her, at the same time drawing something from his coat pocket. He stooped down and

held out his hand under her apparently unseeing eyes, a lump of clay that he gently molded with his fingers. There was no indication of response from the young woman; in a few moments, he rose to his feet and went out with the doctor.

“May I drop in and see Jane whenever I come to work on your portrait?” he asked. “Her condition is a challenge to my belief in the inherent creativity of people, and I’d like to try to reach her.”

Permission was readily granted, and each time the artist finished his work on the portrait, he went back to see Jane. And each time he repeated the routine of his first visit. He stooped down, held out his hand before Jane’s eyes, and slowly worked the clay with his fingers. The portrait was finished, but he still continued to come back to the hospital to visit the young woman. One day she timidly reached out her hand and touched the clay. On another of his visits, she took it in her hand. Later she took the clay and closed her fingers around it; and when she opened them, she looked wonderingly at the impression she had made on the clay.

Visit followed visit, and each time there was a little more response. Then one day she worked the clay with both hands, slowly and hesitantly; hers was the unmistakable action of a person once again beginning to respond to the stir of life. But never, during all this, did she lift her head or look at the artist. Her appearance continued to be that of one afraid.

In all these weeks, the artist had not spoken to her either but had trusted only in what he could say through his presence and his actions. Finally, one day when she was working the clay in rough shapes, he spoke to her softly: “Jane.” Her hands paused, her head came up slowly, and with caution, she looked at him, the first person she had looked at directly for months. No one can know what happened between the artist and the young woman at that moment as they looked at each other. Some kind of deep meeting was taking place. But still, she did not speak, nor did she smile.

The lump of clay, however, had become a bond between them, and now the artist was helping her to work it into more complex forms. She seemed to be trying to shape something that would not come. She became increasingly tense and irritable. Finally, she threw the clay down on the table where they were working and hit it angrily with her clenched fist, then looked at the artist anxiously. He smiled at her and put his hand over her clenched and angry hand.

Wonderingly, she looked down at his hand on hers as both rested on the shapeless clay; gradually, a faint smile softened the anxious hopelessness that had shown on her face for so many months. Reassured, they returned to their work, and the artist said, “You see, Jane, I like you and believe in you, so you don’t need to worry when things don’t go right.”

It was then that she spoke for the first time in months. Searching his face, she said, “You like me?”

From this time on, her progress was rapid. Before long, Jane was able to talk with her doctors, and little by little, they were able to piece together the story of what led to her breakdown.

In brief, it was this: Her parents had struggled to achieve the financial and social position that was theirs. They had great hopes and plans for their older daughter. They loved her, but their anxiety for her to excel in popularity and accomplishments had made her feel that she would be loved only so long as she continued to meet their expectations. Love was not free, she felt.

She had to earn it with good behavior and with achievements in those areas that were important to the people from whom she looked for love and acceptance.

When she approached marriage, she brought with her that same idea of love. But so emotionally exhausted was she from her efforts to meet the demands of love as she understood them that she could not face the demands of the marriage-love-relationship that lay ahead of her. Quite appropriately, then, on the eve of her marriage, she fled from life and love, and found refuge in illness.

It was the self-giving love of the artist, his gentle touch, and his patience that had within them the power to reawaken the love in Jane. The more we understand her story, the more we understand that the love of God as seen in the person of the artist has the power to heal and renew. It is that same love of God that was in Jesus. And when anyone of us extends our hand in love to another, that love of God and its power literally begins to flow. There are times when we have to hold out our hand to another person again and again before that other person will take hold of our hand. This was the case with the artist and Jane Foster. Time after time, he held out his hand with that lump of clay in it.

I believe this story from Mark's Gospel, of Jesus taking Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and drawing the fever out of her, was remembered especially by the early church because many of those earlier followers of Jesus had a similar experience. They had allowed Jesus to take them by the hand. When individuals have allowed the power of God's love as seen in Jesus to touch their lives, the fever of life has been drawn from them — the fevers of anxiety and fear, of restless self-seeking, of grasping greed, of lust — all have left as Jesus' hand has touched them.

Today, we in the church are to be the hands of Jesus, and we are called to reach out and hold hands with both the touchable and the untouchable in whatever way can be most beneficial to them. Amen.