Sunday, May 28, 1989
ALL ABOUT HANDS
Luke 12:16-21, 9:57-62

Look at your hands for a moment. What do they say about you? 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. Or in a class, the teacher will often ask the students to raise their hands. When you look at the hands that are raised, it's 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 or lotion a person uses.

Years ago in the summertime, I was the fill-in preacher for a number of Sundays in a small rural church, and as I shook hands with the people after the service, I could tell that most of the men present were farmers or people who worked with their hands. Their hands were large and rough compared to mine.

Although I'm not sure how 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 the fists and cannot relax, will have different kinds of wrinkles and lines in their palms than an individual who is relaxed and easygoing. Thus the lines in our hands do reveal 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 violinist, or the hands of a baseball, football, or basketball player. We often hear a sports commentator say — that person has a marvelous pair of hands. Or think of the touch of a loving person's hands when one is feeling bad. A person puts his or her hand on your shoulder and tells you that everything is going to be all right. Or perhaps you've had a massage and felt the wonderful sensation of having your muscles relaxed because of someone's talented and trained 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.

First, we can wring our hands! The world and the church are full of hand-wringers. These are the people who take their stand beside a wailing wall and moan, "Isn't it awful? The world is going to the dogs. Woe is me. It's terrible. There's not an honest person left anywhere." And they wring their hands. Or an individual will say, "Poor me. All of my problems are caused by others. Nobody understands me or cares for me." And they wring their hands in self-pity. Elijah, the prophet, at one point in his life became a hand-wringer. 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 there, 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. We are told almost daily that drug usage, especially among young people, is on the rise. We read about the ethics problems of people in Congress. The environment we live in is under threat. More and more people in

this country are going to bed hungry each night, and most of them are children. Homelessness is increasing.

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.

Secondly, we have people who, instead of wringing their hands in despair, quietly fold their hands, and I'm not talking about folding their hands in prayer. I mean folding their hands in an "I don't care" attitude. It's one of the easiest things to do with one's hands. That is why so many people do it.
What do the hand-folders care about what happens to others and to the world at large? 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 hands again. They are relaxing. They fold their hands over their generously proportioned stomachs and go into a coma.

They are not concerned about the rising rate of poverty. Rather, they quote the Bible out of context and reply — Jesus said, "We would always have the poor with us," as if Jesus were implying that there is nothing that should or could be done about people in poverty. He was not saying that at all. Jesus never encouraged people to fold their hands and do nothing.

Instead, 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?"

Jesus allows the listener to become closely identified with the delightful dilemma of the rich man and his rejoicing at being free from any anxiety about the necessities of life because he has all the money he will ever need. It is the kind of appeal that contemporary lotteries regularly use to induce persons to buy tickets. From this sympathetic perspective, the listener hears God's shocking judgment: "Fool."

So it is with the hand-folder or the person who would like to be a hand-folder. The hand-folder does not do much good for anyone.

A third thing 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 a venturesome penny can escape, and so that your hands will not be caught reaching out to anyone or joining hands with anyone to solve a problem.
Hands that are kept in our pockets are not much use in any task. But it adds to some people's security. It protects 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 or to join hands with someone else to work at solving a problem.

The hands-in-pocket person is the tightwad. He or she likes to stand around and complain 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 tightwad, and God says to all such persons, “Fool.”

A fourth category of what we do with our hands is to be hand-droppers. There 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. We’ve all had the experience of a person putting his hands to help with something we are carrying and then not carrying his part of the load.
Jesus was talking about those who begin and then drop their hands in the second scripture reading we heard earlier. He described those who promise to do something but then back down with various kinds of excuses. Several persons had said they would follow him and become his disciples, and when Jesus invited them to come along, they backed away, dropped their hands, and made excuses. People who are hand-droppers are those who are always making a good start, but then there is no follow-through.

Jesus said of such people, “No one who puts his or her hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

But we don’t have to be hand-wringers, or hand-folders, or hands-in-pockets, or hand-droppers, even when the problems we face look so large and unmanageable. This is not to deny that the problems we face are large and often complex, but if we can’t do everything, we can at least do something. Or as someone said long ago, “It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.” We can still lay our hands on to some task. It’s always better to be part of the solution to a problem than to be a part of the problem itself.

For the Christian, this business of putting our hands to a task and accepting responsibility is especially important. Christians are “hands-on” people. It is our faith that as human beings we are trusted and valued in God’s creation — so much so that God has put much of our destiny into our own hands. God has given us a large amount of freedom to function in this creation.

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 sometimes becomes a justification for doing nothing on our part — for wringing our hands, or folding our hands, or putting our hands into our pockets, or dropping our hands.

Life is meant to be a dynamic, responsible order in which every person has the opportunity and responsibility for doing something that contributes to the whole.

Not only are Christians “hands-on” people, but we are also the kind of people who join hands with others, because we know that more things are accomplished for the good in this world when we join hands with others to solve problems and change things for the better, and it’s also more fun. One of the greatest joys in this life is that which comes from working together with others to bring some good into this world. I keep remembering that old song I learned as a child—"All Join Hands and We’ll Have a Happy Time.”

Years ago, Christian people, in order to extend the healing ministry of Christ, joined hands and started some of the first hospitals in this country. In like manner, the first institutions to take care of aging people in this country were started by Christians who joined hands.

God expects us to join hands and then together lay our hands to a task. We are to choose wisely and decide responsibly. In each and every situation, we can help with our hands, or we

can keep our hands to ourselves. The laying on of hands has had a large place in Christian history. The Bible tells us that Jesus frequently laid his hands on persons as he healed them or comforted them. In ordination services, there is the ceremony of the “laying on of hands,” as people gather around the one being ordained and place their hands on his or her head.

But another very important laying on of hands takes place when, as an individual or as 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.