Sunday, February 6, 2000
**HE TOOK HER BY THE HAND**
Mark 1:29-39

There are times when the simple act of taking someone's hand or holding another person's hand can make all the difference in the world. A few months ago, I was visiting someone in the hospital who was dying. I was told by the family members and the nurses that he had only a day or more to live. As I stood by his bedside, I gently took one of his hands in mine. I asked the family members to join hands, and together we had a prayer at the bedside. It was obvious to me from the way the dying man was clasping my hand that he was comforted not only by the prayer but by our clasping of hands. A few hours later, he died. The family members later commented that our prayer comforted them as well.

Jesus knew how important human touch is. The New Testament is filled with stories of Jesus reaching out with his hands to gently 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. What the cause of the fever was, we are not told.

Maybe she was overly nervous because her son-in-law was bringing his teacher to the house, or she had been busy with feverish activity to prepare for the visit. The cause of a fever is not always easy to diagnose. 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 disease but also the person.

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

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

Some years back, when I had surgery with a local anesthetic, one of the most comforting memories is that of a nurse gently holding my hand between her two hands during the surgery while at the same time softly describing to me 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 recall the warmth of her hands.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, in his book Love, Medicine, and Miracles, underscores the value of human touch in the relationship between physicians and patients. He claims that it not only helps the patient, but has helped him as well.

Here's part of what he wrote: "First I began by gently 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." Touching another person can have amazing results. In kindergarten, we are taught: when we go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

I've never forgotten a story which Reuel Howe tells in his book, The Creative Years.

Jane Foster had been a lovely young woman and her parents had done their best to give her every advantage. She was attractive, popular, and had many talents. When she was 21, she met a young man, they grew to love each other, and made plans to marry. The night before the wedding, she collapsed, and the ceremony had to be indefinitely postponed.

Toward the end of the year, Dr. Miller, the administrator 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," he said.

"What have you done to try to bring her out of wherever she is?" asked the artist. "We've tried every treatment we know about, but none have any effect on her. The chaplain has visited her time and time again, but she admits defeat."

At first, it seemed as if sheer exhaustion was the problem and all she needed was a good rest. Her condition grew worse, however. She became more and more depressed and made several attempts to commit suicide. She finally had to be placed in the mental ward of a hospital. Even there, she deteriorated until she would do nothing for herself. She sat in a corner day after day, looking at the floor, a pathetic contrast to the bright young woman she used to be.

Her family and her close friends were shocked at the change in her, for which there seemed no explanation. The doctors talked to her parents, her fiancé, and others who might give them some information to explain what had happened. But her condition remained the same — inert, sullen, silent. The weeks in which she remained in this state went by with no improvement.

The artist continued to talk about the case. Finally, he put down his brushes with a comment about not having enough light to paint anymore at the time and asked if he might see Jane. They left the doctor's office and went down the long corridors of the hospital to the room where Jane sat on the floor in a corner. The artist stood on the threshold, looking at the young woman who seemed more dead than alive — a human being whose spirit had seemingly 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 her, while at the same time drawing something out of his coat pocket. Then he stooped down, held out his hand under her apparently unseeing eyes, and let her see a lump of clay that he gently molded with his fingers. There was no indication of response from her. In a few moments, he rose to his feet and left the room 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 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 in his hand. On another of his visits, she took the clay 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 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 lost in her own world.

In all the visits, the artist had not spoken to her but had trusted only in what he could say through his presence and his actions. One day, when she was working the clay in rude 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 come alive. 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, 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, “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, she was able to talk with her doctors, and little by little, they were able to piece together the story of what had 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 oldest daughter. They loved her, but their anxiety for her to excel in popularity and accomplishments had been interpreted by her so that she concluded that she would be loved only so long as she continued to meet their expectations. Love was not free, she thought. She had to earn it with good behavior and with achievement in those areas that were important to the people from whom she sought love.

When she approached marriage, she brought with her that same idea of love. In her case, she was so emotionally exhausted from her efforts to meet the demands of love as she understood them that she could not face the additional demands of the marriage-love relationship as she interpreted it. So on the eve of her wedding, 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 within her.

The more we understand her story, the more we can understand that the love of God as it flowed through the artist has the power to heal and renew. It is that same love that was in Jesus and is still present in and among us. When any one of us extends our hand in love to another, that love of God and its power literally begin to flow. There are times when we have to hold out our hand to another person again and again before that other person has enough trust to take hold of our hand. This was the case with Jane and the artist. 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 lifting her up, was instrumental in drawing the fever out of her. It was especially remembered by the early church because many of those early followers of Jesus had a similar experience. They had allowed Jesus to take them by the hand. They knew that when he took their hand, he lifted out from them the fevers of fear, anxiety, restless self-seeking, grasping greed, and many other fevers in life.

Harold "Pee Wee" Reese died in August 1999. In addition to his skill as a shortstop and being on seven pennant-winning teams and the 1955 world champion Brooklyn Dodgers, he is also remembered because as captain of the 1947 Dodgers, he refused to sign a petition protesting the hiring of Jackie Robinson as the first African-American major league baseball player. In addition, as the 1947 baseball season began, when the crowd in Philadelphia was booing Robinson, Reese trotted over to second base and gave his teammate a handshake and a hug. That gesture of inclusion signaled to his teammates, the National League, and the fans that Pee Wee Reese valued and respected Jackie Robinson as a human being and as a teammate. On a human level, that gesture depicted how God loves and accepts each one of us.

"Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her." Each one of us can do the same for other human beings. Amen.