

## His Hands, Our Hands, His Hands

Mark 1:40–45

Today we celebrate the commissioning of our new Stephen Leaders. Through them, our congregation and our community will discover a new level of caregiving. With the guidance of these Stephen Leaders, Brad, Mark, Dan, and Lori, Stephen Ministers will bring the compassion and support of the Lord to people in pain, brokenness, and grief, trusting always that God will provide the cure—as he does in this passage from Mark.

Joseph Merrick died in London in 1890 at the age of 27. He suffered from neurofibromatosis and was often known by the derogatory name “the Elephant Man” due to his physical appearance.

Frederick Treves was senior surgeon and lecturer at the prestigious London Hospital. When Treves found Joseph Merrick, he was being displayed at a traveling human exhibition show. Because of the scorn and laughter of the audiences, Joseph had almost completely withdrawn into himself. When he was not on display in the sideshow, he wore a sack over his head to mask his looks.

When Joseph was 22, Dr. Treves took him into the hospital as a permanent resident, supplying him with a bed-sitting room and a bathroom. It proved to be one of the two most important events in Joseph’s life.

All he could say, in a tone of total amazement, were the words: “This is my home. This is my home.”

The other transformation in Joseph Merrick’s life occurred when a young lady entered his room, wished him good morning, and shook his hand. He sobbed uncontrollably. Apart from his mother, she was the first woman who had ever smiled at him, ever touched his hand.

From then on he lost his shyness. He loved to see his door open, and the world flocked to him. He had at long last found a place of acceptance, no longer an outcast.

Someone who cared for him changed his life, someone who looked past appearances and saw a suffering child of God. He had always been untouchable, but by a touch he felt himself included amongst humanity. True human concern and a genuine touch finally made him a full member of the human community.

In Mark, chapter 1, Jesus encounters a man who is excluded from society because of a skin disease. In ancient Israel anyone with a skin discoloration was supposed to stay completely clear of others until cured. Whatever the disease on this man’s skin, Jesus does the unthinkable. He mercifully responds to the man’s request, reaches out his hand, and touches him. For first-century Judaism, this passage poses two giant problems.

First, the man was supposed to stay away from healthy persons, and second, whoever touched him immediately became ritually unclean.

Jesus' style is to touch people no matter what their condition and no matter what others think of them. The Gospel of Mark also records Jesus' touching Peter's sick mother-in-law, a dead girl, a deaf man, a demon-possessed boy, and a blind man. Mark is the only Gospel that tells of Jesus actually lifting children in his arms to bless them. Jesus is a hands-on person. In touching people, he changes their lives with his hands. Jesus' religion is in his hands, doing things for others in God's name. Jesus' ministry demonstrates why God gave us hands.

Harold Russell describes hands: "What wonderful, efficient machines they were. Hands. So simple. Just some bones, muscles, nerves, blood vessels and skin. Nothing to them, really. And yet, how valuable, how perfect, how cunningly contrived to do so many marvelous things. Like pitching a ball or painting a picture or caressing someone you loved."<sup>1</sup> Harold Russell deeply appreciated hands, because his own hands had been destroyed during combat in the Second World War.

In the Old Testament, what is usually translated as to ordain someone literally means to *fill their hand*.<sup>2</sup> People set aside for special ministries in the Old Testament came away with something that filled their hands, their time, and their hearts.

Today we will commission our Stephen Leaders. We rejoice in advance for all those people they will touch through their caring service. We believe that God has granted them this service, and so we confirm their calling with our prayers. As those ordained in the Old Testament, we have filled their hands with something to do. Like the Lord they follow, they dedicate their hands to God's service. They have plenty to do that will occupy their hands, their time, and their hearts.

We commission our Stephen Leaders today and call them to take Jesus as their example. So their hands are dedicated to God's service, as were Jesus' hands all his life. G. A. Studdert-Kennedy's poem focuses on Jesus' hands:

Christ that was born on Christmas Day,  
Laid upon the world His two small hands,  
Lifting it worlds and worlds away  
Up to the level of Love's demands.  
And those Hands hold though pierced with nails,

They hold on still in power and pain,

And they shall hold till Satan fails

And Love comes to His own to reign.

All Christians are ministers for Christ. So the special service into which our Stephen Leaders enter awaits us all to some degree. Everywhere around us people await our care, people who, perhaps like Joseph Merrick, have suffered all their lives yet whose spirits will be freed for true human life by the few hours we spend with them. They await our concern and care as Christ's people so that they can come to true, abundant life. Being Christ's hands in the world is not just for Stephen Leaders or Stephen Ministers, but for everyone. When we finally realize that, not only will others be changed, but we ourselves will be changed.

Toyohiko Kagawa died in Japan in 1960. If ever there was a person who clearly relied upon the gifts from God's hand, it was he. After a horrible childhood in which he was scorned for his illegitimacy and later orphaned, he found faith in Christ and meaning in his life through the love of Christian missionaries. When he became a Christian, even his relatives disowned him. As a Christian in Japan, he had few human examples to imitate. He simply had to follow Jesus, and follow him he did—right into the slums, serving the most needy. For the rest of his life he was a Christian light, not only to Japan but also to the whole world.

Listen to his poem “Discovery”:

I cannot invent New things,  
Like the airships Which sail On silvery wings;  
But today A wonderful thought In the dawn was given,  
And the stripes on my robe, Shining from wear,  
Were suddenly fair, Bright with a light Falling from Heaven—  
Gold, and silver, and bronze Lights from the windows of Heaven.  
And the thought Was this: That a secret plan Is hid in my hand;  
That my hand is big, Big, Because of this plan.  
That God, Who dwells in my hand, Knows this secret plan  
Of the things He will do for the world Using my hand!

Jesus’ ministry is to reclaim the world for God, to hold on to the world for God’s sake by reaching out to the untouchable, including the unacceptable, and loving the despised, because each one is God’s dear child, full of the potential God gave to each of us. Jesus is on an offensive for God when he touches the man with the dreaded skin disorder. He attacks disease and the social division caused by illness when he touches this afflicted person and frees him of his suffering.

Doing so means others might see him as ritually unclean. It's the price he pays to heal the man. But that's Jesus: paying the price to heal others. The Gospel of Matthew summarizes Jesus' ministry: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matthew 8:17).

Friends, the world around us is full of people who await our faith and love. They need our Stephen Ministry, but they also need each of us. As our Stephen Leaders are commissioned today to follow Jesus in service, not only will they help the care receivers of the Stephen Ministers they train, but their ministry will also help the rest of us to take our place, serving Christ with our hands. Since our Lord Jesus has chosen to use our hands to do God's work on earth, let us be willing to love and care for others for God's sake. If we do, we will show ourselves to be true children of our heavenly Father, and we will bring others to the complete life God created for us all.

May the peace of God...

WOV#735 God! When Human Bonds Are Broken