

## BY THE HAND

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
February 7, 2021**

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c  
Mark 1:29-39

When the Bible speaks of someone as “possessed by a demon”, what does it mean? Unfortunately, there is no built-in glossary, only those we create from inference and historical analysis. When I hear that phrase, I always think of my brother-in-law, Steve, a brilliant banker and entrepreneur whose financial success enabled him to feed a taste for cocaine that became an addiction. It got so that all he could think about was his next “line” of the drug. He would sacrifice anything for it: his job, his marriage, his four-year-old daughter, and ultimately his life. He died of an overdose at the age of 40.

Or perhaps we should think of those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression: war veterans, victims of school shootings, members of Congress and others terrorized by the recent insurrection at the Capitol. PTSD is associated with elevated incidents of nightmares, anxiety, anger, aggression, sexual dysfunction, alcohol and drug abuse and suicide. Sadly, given the violence in our society and world, we will have among us for years to come hundreds of thousands of these haunted souls, each in need of healing.

Healing the sick and similarly possessed was a central part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. His gift of physical and spiritual healing restored human beings to full participation in their communities. Healing and deliverance from pain and illness is a hallmark of the great prophetic dream called the Kingdom of God, where no one goes hungry, the ill and grieving are healed, and those in prisons both physical and mental are set free for abundant life. Over and over again in the gospels we hear that Jesus “went about healing many who were sick or possessed by demons.” It is a foundational image of the work we share as his followers.

When in this morning’s lesson Jesus went to Simon’s house, he had just come from healing a man like my brother-in-law. And there he encountered Simon’s mother-in-law, who was sick with a fever. Jesus walked over, took her by the hand, and, the text says, “raised her up.” That same Greek verb for raised or lifted up is used on Easter morning—“he is not here, he is raised up.” Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is raised up from her illness, and what does she do? She begins to minister, to serve. She is the first active witness to what a resurrected life in Jesus looks like. At baptism, we too are raised into a new life of service or ministry to others.

We may not know her name, but the mother of Simon’s wife is a model for our own servant ministry. Touched and healed by Jesus, she becomes minister of healing herself. She gets up from her bed and presumably begins to feed people, as any good Jewish hostess of the day would do for her son in law and his honored guests.

The very next encounter that Jesus has when he leaves Capernaum is also about touching and healing someone—this time a leper. The leper is told to keep quiet about his healing, but he can't do it—he has to tell the world—so that Jesus subsequently can't even enter a town without being besieged. The world today is still desperate for healing. Like the street outside Simon's mother-in-law's home, the streets out there in suburban Westchester and beyond are also filled with the sick and possessed, each one eager to be made whole.

We know the touch of a hand can heal, restore life, and exorcise our demons as well. Michelangelo used that powerful image of life-giving touch when he pictured creation as God reaching out a hand to Adam, offering life. We often say that Christians are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. How do our hands serve as instruments of healing, and help to raise others to new life?

Simon's mother-in-law gets up and serves a meal. Food and feasting and the heavenly banquet are central images of a healed creation. We embody those images every time we come to the Lord's Table. The Good Samaritan ensures that the robbery victim he lifts up and takes to an inn is provided with food and drink for healing. The resurrected Jesus shares breakfast on the beach with his grieving and dispirited disciples. You and I have abundant opportunities to feed the hungry—through support of Feeding Westchester, for example, or the Heifer Project or our own supper outreach organized by Deacon Susie Michel. We can also support with our votes politicians who advocate strongly for aggressive policies to address the shameful prevalence of ongoing hunger in our affluent society, especially among children.

The touch of healing is also about caring for those with physical illness. Our hands may be put to healing work in literally tending the sick, infirm, or housebound, but, equally importantly, ensuring that all members of the community have access to medical care. Our hands may serve in the sickroom or the voting booth.

Hands can also heal psychic illness. My brother-in-law had the demon called "no hope." He didn't meet the needed hand of healing in this life; we pray that hands of the good shepherd who led him home will bind up his wounds. How many others yearn for the needed touch of well-being, whether in a person who will sit and listen to the pain behind the war stories or the searching hands and eyes that will take a fallen comrade to shelter or hospital.

Hands may provide hope in surprising ways. One of the worship services at a Presbyterian gathering I attended before the pandemic hit included members of a local Ethiopian Orthodox congregation, nearly all of them refugees. They shared during the worship a joyful telling of the story of Israel going down into Egypt and being led out by the hand of God. That was what we were told before the story began; and as the chanting started, we may not have understood the words, but we did hear and see the liberation of that journey to freedom. During the lengthy singing a young woman beat the rhythm of the tale on a large and powerful drum, three feet across and five feet long. She alternated between loud booming beats on the large end and staccato conversation on the small end. Her hands held the whole of the singing group together. Those who sat in the congregation accompanied her with complex clapping rhythms and hula-like movements

of their hands. Together a varied and disparate group of hundreds formed one whole, focused on the power of God to lead us into wholeness and holiness.

Where have you met the healing hand of God? Where has that hand, gloved in human flesh, reached out to lift you up? Maybe that hand has fed you or soothed your troubled and fevered brow. Perhaps that hand has even shaken you to greater wakefulness, to notice the lonely soul or the suffering mob in the street outside.

Jesus' healing touch was grounded in open vulnerability. He made himself available. He received the yearning masses, healing as many as he could. He taught the crowds about the present reality of God's reign, breaking in all around them, and he offered hope. He silenced the demons who would cry out that there is no hope. He formed disciples by letting them try the work themselves, even though they frequently failed. He held himself open to whatever and whomever the day presented, even the terror of execution at the hands of an occupying government. His service was one of constant lifting up, in the face of forces that would tear down.

Will you let yourself be taken by the hand and lifted up? Where and how will you join hands, reach out, and lift up others to healing? For, indeed, as Simon and his companions said to Jesus when they found him at prayer, "everyone is searching for" that physician of hope.

The Black blues musician, Thomas A. Dorsey, was in need like that one night in 1932. He had traveled in his Model A Ford from his home in Chicago to St. Louis to sing in a revival. During the first night of the meetings someone brought him a telegram while he was still on the platform. It was horrible news. His wife, Nettie, was pregnant with their first child, and the message was that she had died giving birth to their son. He rushed to a phone while the people were still singing and found that the message was true. A friend drove him back to Chicago that night. "When I arrived" Dorsey said, "I found that the wonderful baby boy was seemingly fine, and yet, that night he also died. I buried my wife and little son in the same casket." He went on, "I became very despondent and filled with grief." A few days later he wrote his haunting gospel hymn:

Precious Lord, take my hand  
 Lead me on, let me stand  
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn  
 Through the storm, through the night  
 Lead me on to the light  
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.<sup>1</sup>

Let us pray.

O God, your loving hand has made us in your own image, given us all we possess, and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. On this day when you deliver into our hands the bread and wine that bind us together with all who share his name, reach out your hand again and heal us, that we may respond in kind, offering your hope and healing to all who are broken in body or spirit, that together we may be your whole and healed and holy Body on this earth. This we pray in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932.