WITH THESE HANDS

a sermon by
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The theme of this summer’s Montreat youth Conference was WITH THESE HANDS. In his opening keynote address, David Sharpe led the 1000 youth and their adult leaders in a powerful reflective mediation on HANDS, and the many varied ways we use the hand and hands in our everyday speech and relationships.

For example, when you greet someone, what do you do? shake hands (and we do it coming and going). Often the kind of handshake you receive is your first introduction to what sort of person you are dealing with: are the hands cold or warm, is the handshake, firm, too firm, limp or tentative?

We like to receive evenhanded treatment. We are wary of glad handling politicians, or one who wants you to grease the palm of your hand in return for a favor. A magician does his tricks through sleight of hand. If you are good with your hands you are said to be “handy”. If you are NOT handy, you are “all thumbs”. Think about what such a hand would look like. One thumb is valuable; how awkward would “all thumbs” be?

Extending your open hands or the palm of your hands is a welcoming, friendly gesture. We ordain and baptize and extend blessing with the palms of our hands. In olden days, when a person pledged fealty or obedience or showed respect, he kissed the BACK of the hand. A back handed compliment is no compliment at all. Even when we help others with our hands, subtle messages are given. It makes a big difference whether you are giving a hand OUT or a hand UP.

Expressions change over time. It used to be that all clothes were HAND made. Then, ordinary clothes were factory made, and only special clothes were hand made. Now, most folks prefer to purchase their clothes as opposed to making them by hand. Hand me downs can be a treat or a burden, depending on your age and your outlook – and what is being handed-down?

If we are happy or appreciative, we put our hands together and clap. If you want to feel connected to other person, you join hands. If you are in love, you hold hands. A child’s first sexual experience usually comes through holding hands with a boy or girl of similar age – and being aware of what you are doing.

Everybody wants to hear about something first hand, as opposed to second hand. A second hand car is not as desirable as a new car, so much so, that car dealers invented a new term: previously owned.

To raise your hands in anger is to make a fist. To extend friendship is to offer a hand. To pray, you fold your hands or offer them to God. Some Christians are even so bold as to raise their hands to God.

While on vacation out west this summer, I saw those little stands beside the road selling Native American jewelry. Typically, the signs would advertise hand crafted or hand made jewelry. I didn’t think much about it, until I heard the interpretation that hand crafted means machine tooled and hand assembled, as opposed to HAND MADE – actually made by the hands of a skilled craftsman and genuine artists.

Handmade by a skilled craftsman or genuine artist... This is the image at work in Jeremiah: The prophet goes to the potter house and sees him working at his potters wheel, working, reworking, rejecting some clay, shaping and reshaping until his vessel comes out just the way he wants it. And a word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah, Just like the clay in the potter's hand, [God says] so are you in my hand.
Every vessel begins as a lump of clay on a potter’s wheel. Then it is shaped and reshaped until becomes a pot or dish or a cup or whatever. What the lump of clay becomes depends somewhat on the raw materials, to be sure, but even the best materials remain just a lump of clay until they are placed in the hands of the artist.

Jeremiah’s word to Israel can be heard as a message of judgement or a word of hope. Within the context of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, his word pretty much come to Israel as a heavy message – shape up or be prepared to ship out! For like a potter throws away a spoiled pot, so God will cast aside Israel if it persists in its evil and faithless ways. But these words can also be heard as a word of HOPE: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? When a vessel he was making was spoiled in the potter’s hand, he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. That is, God may discard a spoiled vessel and start anew, but it is also possible that God will keep working with his chosen people until they come to the perfection God has in mind.

On Christian Education Sunday, we gravitate more towards the hopeful side than the judgmental side of Jeremiah’s prophetic word. Today we give thanks that we are BEING SHAPED by the word of God. Today we give thanks for the life and faith we have received at the hand of God and the hands of God’s servants. And today we give thanks for lives, particularly young lives, being shaped by skilled and committed teachers.

But Christian Education Sunday also a time for us to reflect on OUR hands. What WE are doing WITH THESE HANDS. Whose lives are WE shaping? And what shape are those lives taking with these hands? Are we teaching shame with angry hands? Are we imparting God’s love and acceptance with open and caring hands? Are we treating each other with brutal, punishing hands? Or are we supporting and nurturing one another with comforting, soothing, loving, gentle hands? What are we doing with these hands?

It has been said that Christianity is always but one generation from extinction. If but one generation drops the ball, if one generation fails to pass on that which it has received, Christian faith will disappear. Jesus personalized it this way: Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Shaping lives is NOT an optional part of Christian discipleship. Working with these hands is not an option, or something that others can do, while others of us watch. And sit on our hands.

Now, I would hope that the educational task is not a cross to carry! For sure, some teaching assignments are more burdensome than others. And others are more rewarding. But anyway you cut it, there is no room for bystanders in Christian faith. Either you are being shaped by the hands of God or you are NOT being shaped. Either you are shaping lives with your hands or you are not shaping, and Jesus says, if you are not shaping, you not a disciple. A disciple of Jesus follows and leads. A disciple grows and gives. A disciple is shaped by God AND in the name of God shapes the life and faith of others.

As a thanksgiving season art project a schoolteacher asked her first graders to draw a picture of something for which they were thankful. She thought of how little the children from poor neighborhoods actually had to be thankful for. But she knew most of them would draw pictures of turkeys or tables with food. So she was taken aback by the picture a little boy named Douglas submitted: a simple, childishly drawn hand.

The pictures were displayed, and with each one she led a discussion. When she came to the picture of the hand, the class was captivated by the abstract image. "I think it is the hand of God that brings us food," one child volunteered. "I think it is a farmer's hand," another suggested, “because he grows the turkeys.” Finally, she asked Douglas whose hand it was. “It’s your hand, teacher! It’s your hand I’m thankful for!” (ChSp 133)

God – you are the potter, we are the clay. Mold us and make us after your will, while we are waiting, yielded and still. For Christ has no hands, but our hands, to do his work today. AMEN.
Luke 14:25-33

25 Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26 "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31 Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 "Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. 11 Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.