

Luke 22: 14-23

“Hands on the Table”
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Ash Wednesday Service

R.P.C.
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On an evening, just like this evening, we are told that: “(Jesus) took bread, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples saying, “This is my body ... this cup is the new covenant in my blood...” “But see, the hand of one who betrays me is . . . on the table.” “And they began to question one another, which one of them it was...”

This meal around the table was an essential part of the passion week of Jesus ... this was the week when he would be betrayed, denied and eventually crucified. His passion could be considered the impetus for our season of Lent; meaning that for the next 40 days, excluding Sundays, we are to look within ourselves to see wherein we too betray and deny him though our sinfulness. For during these coming days, our hands are on the table.....

Hands on the table – There were so many hands on that table that night- which hand did Jesus mean? Which hands bore the marks of betrayal? Sure, we know Jesus meant the hand of Judas that was on the table. Well, one hand of Judas was on the table all right; but the other one was below the table, clutching a small leather purse, full of silver coins. Yes, of course we know that Judas will betray him – of this much, we already know.... Surely, it was Judas’ hand, and his hand alone, of which Jesus spoke when he said, “Behold, the hand of the one who betrays me, is with me on the table.” But was it? Was Judas’ hand the only one which betrays?

Judas’ hand was not the only hand on that table that night. Look again carefully – ah, here we see Simon Peter’s hands. . . They are large, twisted fisherman’s hands. They are hands marked with calluses caused by salt water, the oars and the ropes of fishing nets. Though he may not have fished in a while, they still smell of boats and sweat, and fish.

Yes, Simon Peter’s hands are on the table – And later that night, in the middle of the night, around the glow of a fire, Peter will also betray Jesus. “I never knew him!” he said – not once, but three times - THREE times before the rooster crowed. Out of fear for his own life, Peter tried to “wash his hands” of any association. Simon Peter was “the Rock” as Jesus called him, the chief disciple – the spokesman for the rest of the Twelve. His hands had been on the table that night too: strong, firm, calloused hands – yet hands that turned to trembling and

shaking when confronted and questioned – hands that covered his face from the light of the fire when facing the prospect of arrest, punishment ... the smell of death.... So maybe Jesus was speaking about Simon Peter's hands too, for he knew and predicted that Peter would also betray him....

Now look at Matthew's hands.... His fingers are fidgeting on the table ... tap, tap, tapping - wondering who it is who will betray the Master. This tax collector's hands on the table are distinctively marked by being clean and soft. His palms are shiny, having been smoothed and polished by years of raking coins across a table top and the gentle wear of coins being held, and admired and counted. His fingers had become nimble from the sorting: one for you, one for Roman tax, one for me... Or was it – one for you, one for the Roman tax, and TWO for me? These hands are smooth, but stained with cooperation with the Romans – despised hands – hands hated by the Jews who gave to Caesar only out of fear. So now Matthew's hands and fingers drum nervously on the table.... His hands were secretly revealing what Matthew knew all too well – that given the right circumstances , the right time – and most of all the right amount – he knew he could and would betray anyone ... anyone.

Let's not forget Thomas' hands. . . . One hand is on the table, taking the bread and the cup up to his mouth. But the other hand is nervously rubbing his troubled brow ... The questions just keep coming: Who is this Jesus really? What does his strange message really mean? What is he trying to prove? What kind of Messiahship is he talking about? What kind of Messiah is he going to be? Sure, he has told me who he is – and now, where he is going. I've seen his miracles and heard his words. But honestly. . . I still don't know... Where is the proof? Where's the evidence? To doubt as I do ... well, isn't that to deny the truth ... and to deny him too? Thomas' hands now on the table, would even later be tempted to touch the wounds in Jesus' side and explore the hands of Jesus where the nails had pierced. So Thomas' hands are also capable of betrayal ... the betrayal caused by insufficient belief.

All these hands – all these hands on the table ... So many different hands – so many different positions and expressions . . . Some hands are folded in idleness or passivity, or shut in possessiveness – Some hands are fisted in anger; some are pointing an accusing finger of condemnation and judgment . . . Some hands are trembling in fear ... So many hands . . . so many ways of betrayal.

Also on the table is the hand that strikes out.... She doesn't mean for it to happen that way ... It's just that she gets so frustrated and angry with them, that, well, she slaps them; and then wonders why they hit each other with they argue

and fight. She doesn't do it often, mind you, but it is enough to continue the cycle. You need to understand that it is the same treatment she received as a child, and now she receives it from her husband . . . sometimes... It is the striking hands continuing their pattern from a previous generation: it is the sins of the fathers and mothers being visited violently upon the children to the third and fourth generations ... a vicious, harmful cycle! That is why the children have come to silently mistrust and fear the hands of the father and mother – hands, that for now at least, rest quietly upon the dinner table.

Here is a hand accustomed to signing signatures at the bottom of long legal documents. But lately, it just hasn't mattered and the hand signs without the eye even reading the small print. No matter how large the contract, no matter how significant the client; no matter anything anymore – for there is no longer any joy in the work – there is no longer any sense of reward. Just last night that signature hand had cradled a handgun, and mulled it all over, before putting it down and fixing another stiff drink. That hand had always been a successful hand, but successful in what? It is a hand that had traveled extensively and had touched and held the finest of things: like silk ties, crystal wine glasses, gold, diamonds – the steering wheels of the most expensive cars. Those hands had always had plenty and the best, but had always been grasping for more ... and more. All those finer things had the weight of emptiness now. Those hands could no longer touch the face of his estranged spouse, or could no longer hug his children or hold his grandchildren. They were hands that had too little time to reach out to them back then, so they moved on. That was then, this is now – and these hands are now empty – empty on the table.

Did you notice her hands, as she hoped you would? Each nail is long, manicured and polished to a high gloss. Her hands are as artistically crafted and painted as ... well as the rest of her. But it's only make-up; a masquerade – a cover-up. It's all a fantasy and a front . . . So now those manicured nails click, click, click on the table . . . They convey a nervousness, a restlessness and a fear ... a fear that someone will discover the secret – the shame that was hidden and buried so many years ago. There is that fear and embarrassment of accidentally revealing the true self – that empty and shallow self – of admitting it even to oneself. If the other people only knew ... My Lord, what if they can read my nervous hands; what if they knew...?

Here at the table is a twitching hand: It is a hand desperately in need – of another drink – or a fix. It is the hand marked by being outstretched in helplessness and despair. It is the hand accustomed to fixing a drink, or filling and

pushing a syringe, or being held out, begging for a dollar or two for another bottle. It is a hand willing to do anything ... anything, even beyond reason – just for another high to cover the pain – anything to just survive. That twitching hand on the table trembles in part because it has betrayed not only itself, but others – so many others. In the pursuit of enhancing life through pure, unrestrained ecstasy, it has expended its very own life; and now it comes to the table twitching, twitching ... desperately gasping for life.

Hands on the table – so many hands on the table. Each hand present there wonders about its own acts of betrayal. Each wonders if it should even be present at the table. Each wonders if it dares to stay at the table with the solemn knowledge of betrayal. So many hands, so many ways of betrayal.

But the hands are here – all the hands are here. There are tired hands here – hands that are weary with tasks and commitments – hand which hold the pieces of broken promises. There are hands here which not weary from actual work are just weary with the business of being hands. There are wrinkled and age-spotted hands here – hands that have been on many tables many times before; but hands that come to this table because of the hope it promises – the promise for the present, and the promise for the future.

There is that other table – that banquet table – a table set for a marriage feast more extravagant and extraordinary than we can imagine. A table where all hands will be present, and it will not matter if the hands are calloused or smooth, stained or unblemished, white or black or olive or yellow; twitching or calm, large or small, old or young – it will not matter because all these hands will be joined by clasping one another ... until they are one.

They will be hands eager to hold, and eager to be held – to touch things that are mundane and things that are holy. They are hands that will not quite understand how they got there – especially when they remember what they have done. No, these hands will not quite grasp the meaning of grace; but then who can understand the touch of the grace-filled hand of God? Can we really understand the gift of invitation, given in spite of our betrayals?

There is a power and mystery surrounding the table where we place our hands. It is a mystery we have experienced before when we have touched the bread and held the cup with our hands. Then, right before our eyes, our hands are mysteriously healed, renewed and restored, to their created and intended shape and use.

That night, Jesus took bread in his hands, and blessed it and broke it and gave it saying, “This is my body ... this cup, is the new covenant in my blood.” Judas was

there . . . Simon Peter was there, as was Matthew; Thomas was there too, as were the other disciples. ALL of us were there – All the betrayers, all the broken ones; all the ones who still do not understand. Yet to all of us – he still offers the bread and the cup to hold in our hands.

On the day after that night when Jesus shared the bread and the cup at the table – on a day just like the one we experienced today: he was led to Calvary's hill. There he stretched out his hands, marked by a carpenter's labor; calloused by constant struggle with the Tempter; hands bleeding and dirty - hands stained with OUR sins, and the sin of the world. Yet, they were open hands stretched out in invitation. They were outstretched hands shared with the world as an invitation to receive and accept the love of God "He's got the whole world ... in his"

Those innocent hands twitched and quivered in pain: "Father, into your HANDS, I commit my spirit.... It is finished...." Then the hands became still.... So now during Lent, we enter his passion.