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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/25/2016, Good Friday
John 19:16b-18

IN NOMINE IESU CHRISTI!

SO THEY TOOK JESUS, AND HE WENT OUT,
BEARING HIS CROSS, TO THE PLACE CALLED THE
PLACE OF THE SKULL, WHICH IN ARAMAIC IS
CALLED GOLGOTHA. THERE THEY CRUCIFIED HIM,
AND WITH HIM TWO OTHERS, ONE ON EITHER SIDE,
AND JESUS BETWEEN THEM.

Pontius Pilate's political maneuvering had failed. When the crowd realized that the governor intended to release Jesus, they accused him of not being Caesar's friend. For a Roman governor to be found guilty of being less than a whole-hearted, loyal friend of Caesar was political suicide. At this point Pilate's disdain for the jealous Jewish leaders turned into cowardly fear. The sentence of death by crucifixion was passed, and with little delay Jesus and a cohort of Roman soldiers and their Centurion set out on a procession of death.

All of the Gospels contain evidence of the extreme weakness of our Divine Lord. He had endured a night and early morning of trials; He had been mocked; He had received a merciless scourging that literally shredded His back; He had lost much blood. It is no wonder that He fell under the weight of the cross. The memory of this procession of death was so painful to the Beloved Disciple that his description is brief and sketchy. He does not mention Christ's falling, but we cannot forget it. We know that Simon of Cyrene bore the cross after the fall, but we do not know how it was possible for the feeble Christ to rise to His feet. He had been abandoned by the disciples whom He loved so dearly. None of the Gospels indicate that someone with a heart for mercy reached out a hand to lift Him to His feet.

The absence of a hand of mercy is bitterly disappointing. Women along the way of sorrows may have wept for Him, but in the moment of greatest need He was alone and unaided. How different from the compassion revealed by the hands of our Divine Redeemer during His earthly ministry! Three years earlier, the Son of God and of Mary and Joseph came to His baptism with the strong hands of a carpenter. His ministry revealed something more, the infinitely stronger hands of the Son of God. Human and divine strength were mingled with love and compassion as His hands reached out whenever He encountered someone in need. Every Christian is familiar with artists' portrayal of the God-Man on the central cross. His arms are stretched out as if to embrace the world He was dying to save. The palms of His

hands, nailed and bloody, are turned in the direction of all who look at Him. They remain ready to receive and bless all who believe in Him.

This should not be surprising for when the Psalmists wrote their majestic anthropomorphic poetry, using human images to describe the mighty acts of God, they often referred to His hands. We see God the Creator in whose hands are the depths of the earth and whose hands formed the dry land. The God who is present in the uttermost parts of the earth will even there hold us in His right hand. As the Israelites remembered their deliverance from the power of Egypt, they cried out, “Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand shatters the enemy.” When the Psalmist remembered God’s preservation of life he saw Him opening His hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing. In much the same way, when the incarnate Son of God undertook His earthly ministry, much of His character and purpose was revealed in and through the actions of His sacred hands.

This is not the observation of an overactive imagination! Throughout His ministry His hands were always ready to receive, to lift up and to bless! The little children who so annoyed the disciples brought forth nothing but love from the heart of the Lord Jesus. To show this He took them up in His arms, laid His hands upon them and blessed them. When lepers came to Him seeking mercy, He defied contagion. He reached out His hand to touch and heal them. He touched the eyes of the blind, and sight was restored. His fingers touched the ears of the deaf and hearing was restored. He touched the tongues of the mute, and speech was restored. When the mother-in-law of Simon Peter lay ill with a high fever, He reached out His hand, lifted her up, sickness was banished and health was restored. He entered the death chamber of the daughter of Jairus; He took the child by the hand, spoke to her, and the room was flooded with life and joy. At Golgotha His hands relinquished their power to receive the executioners nails and to begin His perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Indeed, the final view that the disciples had of the risen Lord took place on the Mount of Ascension. Before the Lord was received into the cloud of divine presence, He raised His hands in His final blessing, a blessing that will remain with His Church until He returns in splendor to welcome His followers into the glorious kingdom.

It is not possible to grasp the full meaning of Christ’s Good Friday sacrifice without calling to mind the love Christ manifested throughout His ministry. His hands, nailed and bloody, remain ready to reach out, receive and bless us even as they did on the first Good Friday. We rejoice in this vision because the hands whose wounds are now regal marks of victory continue to reach out and bless believers until the end of time.

Good Friday is rightly seen as the Friday of divine suffering. Surely it is fitting that we proclaim the unspeakably bitter pain that Christ endured on the Thursday and Friday chosen by the heavenly Father to be the time when satisfaction would

be made for the sins of the world. But even when we add graphic art to our words, both fall short. How can we possibly describe an eternity of suffering condensed into three short hours? Let us then allow the Psalmists to inspire us to concentrate on the hands of our Lord. Let us see them reaching down from the cross to offer us the gift of everlasting life. We cannot possibly avoid Christ's divine suffering, it is always present. However, we can grasp Psalmist's vision and give thanks to Him whose almighty hands, once pierced and now glorified, have set us free from death and hell.

When we call to mind the significance of the hands of our Divine Redeemer and remember the grace and love that flowed forth from them, we cannot but look at our own hands. If we do this carefully we will realize that much of our personality and character is revealed in the ways in which we use our hands. As other Christs in this world surely the actions of our hands will reveal hearts filled with love and concern for our neighbors. We reach out in love and friendship to others. We extend to others hands of charity and generosity to help them in time of need. We joyfully wave our hands at the sight of friends, and we can sadly wave goodbye as we part from them. Forgiveness and reconciliation are best expressed when we reach out our hands to embrace one another. Use of hands in this way reveal to others that in our hearts there is the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. This spirit tenderly invites our neighbors to join us in adoring Him who was crucified and is risen for our redemption.

Alas, the actions of our hands do not always resemble those of the Lord Jesus. At times ours are clenched into fists of frustration and anger, ready to strike out at our neighbor. At times we shake the finger of our right hand in threat and warning. At times our palms are turned toward another as a warning for him to stay away. In one moment our hands caress, in another they reach out to wound.

On this Good Friday as we remember with deep gratitude the love and compassion, the mercy and patience that flowed so freely from the hands of our Lord, both during His ministry and while on the cross, let us look to the actions of our hands. Let us determine to offer up the good and loving actions of our hands as our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of life we have received from His hands. Amen!