

Receive the Holy Spirit

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Baptism of the Lord, January 11, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Have you ever noticed how much we need hands? I'm not talking about our own hands. Our own hands are terribly important. But people who have lost their own hands have survived. They can live a full life. But we're in real bad shape without the hands of others. Think of a mother's hands patting us on the head before we go to sleep - hands that say, "I love you no matter what." Think of the hands of a surgeon which can add years to our lives. Think of the hands of friends slapping us hard on the back when we score a goal. Think of the sound of an auditorium filled with people clapping their hands because you just sang so beautifully. Some of us have felt the soft stroke of a lover's hands - the intimate brush, the sensuous caress of a hand barely touching our skin, a hand that says, "I love you in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in death, as long as we both shall live." We need hands more than we need nearly anything else. Some people can survive, somehow, without the touch of human hands. Simon and Garfunkel sang, "I am a rock. I am an island. I touch no one and no one touches me." But most of us need the hands of others. Hell, Lewis Smedes writes, is where there are no hands, no applause, no support, no caress, no pat.

There are some people, though, we'd never want our hands to touch. Think of some! The thought of touching them *or being touched by them* sends shivers up and down our spines. "Ooh! I wouldn't want to touch them." In India there's a whole caste of people labeled *untouchables*. The ancient Samaritans were untouchables! Samaritans were half-breed Jews, descendants of poor Jews who were left in Palestine after Assyria conquered Israel in 722 B.C. They intermarried with pagans. Two hundred years later, when Jews returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt Jerusalem, the Samaritans opposed their plans. Throughout the centuries tensions grew worse and worse. In the days of Jesus, most Jews would not touch Samaritans.

Jesus, however, spent two days preaching in the Samaritan city of Shechem and many believed on him. After his resurrection he commissioned his apostles to preach in Samaria. So Philip went and preached the Gospel to the Samaritans. Some believed. The apostles must have harbored a lot of suspicion when they heard that Samaritans had become Christians. "Are they really Christians?" It's like the skepticism people felt when Chuck Colson claimed to be born again over twenty years ago. More recently, I was skeptical when I heard that rock star, Alice Cooper became a Christian. And the apostles in Jerusalem were skeptical about the conversion of the Samaritans. So Peter and John traveled to Samaria to check them out. That was a miracle in itself. Two Jewish Christians visiting Samaritans. Peter and John must have experienced a conversion of their own because they started to pray for the Samaritan outcasts - prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Then Peter and James did the unthinkable. They touched the untouchables. They laid their hands on the Samaritan Christians. And something wonderful beyond words happened. The Samaritans received the Holy Spirit.

"Spirit is highly contagious." Fred Buechner has written. "When a man or woman is very excited, very happy, very sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn. You can catch it from what they say or from what they do or just from what happens to the air of a room when they enter it without saying or doing anything. Groups of people also have a spirit, as anybody can testify who has ever been caught up in the spirit of a football game, a political rally, or a lynch mob. Spirit can be good or bad, healing or destructive." God also has a Spirit. God is a Spirit. And God's Spirit is also highly contagious. One way the Bible says we catch the Spirit is through touch. Through human touch! Through the laying on of hands! "Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Receiving the Holy Spirit is like becoming real, becoming more real than we've ever been before, becoming everything God created us to be. That's what receiving the Holy Spirit is like. Some of you are familiar with a book many of us read to our children, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The stuffed rabbit asks the Skin horse, "What is REAL." "Real is a thing that happens to you," the Skin Horse answers. "When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play

with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.” Many Christians are not real because, despite what they say, they don’t really believe that God loves unconditionally. They don’t believe that God loves *them* unconditionally. They don’t believe God loves *their enemies* unconditionally. We become really real when we realize that, in life and in death, God loves, we belong to God, we’re in God’s hands.

When I speak of the hands of God I’m not using a metaphor. God has hands! God has real hands! The hands of God are far more real than ours. They’re the hands of Christ stretched out to us, calling: “Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” They’re the hands that blessed the children. They’re the hands that touched the sick and healed them. They’re the hands that broke the bread and shared it. They’re the hands nailed to the cross that we might be reconciled to God. They’re the strong hands of a loving father. They’re the good, soft, gentle hands of a mother. They’re the faithful, helping hands of a friend. And Jesus once said of his sheep that “No one will snatch them out of my hand.” No one! No thing! No event! Not even sin and death can pluck us from his hands.

A mechanical engineer once told me about a trip he’d made to England. While he was there he was given a tour of some kind of factory by another engineer. At the end of the tour my friend stretched out his hand to shake hands with his host. When he shook hands he noticed that the man couldn’t close his hand, could not give a firm hand shake. He was a little embarrassed and said, “I’m sorry. Years ago I had an accident. A spike was driven through my hand and ever since, I haven’t been able to close it.” Once spikes were driven through God’s hands. Ever since, God hasn’t been able to shut his hands. He holds them out to us, wide open. Day and night God’s hands are stretched out to us.

This morning, we will ordain Rose Comer, Lisa Dewald, Michael Hogg, Robert Hudler as elders, and Peter King and Beverly Hartgrove as deacons. Geoff Henry and Ediene Ringler will be installed as elders. And Dean Cheek will be installed as a deacon. Those who are being ordained will kneel for the laying on of hands. They’ll feel the weight of many hands pressing down on them. They’ll feel the weight of the hands of elders from our church and from other

churches who may be with us this morning. They'll feel the weight of the hands of elders who have served this church going back to 1754. They'll feel the weight of the hands of elders and ministers going all the way back to Peter and James. And they'll also feel the weight of the hands of God upon them. Hands have almost superhuman power. They can be the means by which God's Spirit fills and empowers them and us to do God's work.

In Jean Anouilh's (*ah NOO yuh's*) play, *Becket*, the king has made his old carousing partner, Becket, the archbishop because the king knows that Becket will be compliant with his wishes to bring the church under his control. But he has not counted on the fact that suddenly Becket is showing strength and resistance since he knelt to receive the laying on of hands that set him apart as the archbishop of Canterbury. "Oh, come on Becket, don't you remember. We went on the hunt, you and I, we went to the brothels. You are not acting like yourself."

"Perhaps", said Becket, "I am not like myself. For I have been called. I have felt for the first time in my life that I have been entrusted with something. That day in the cathedral when (I knelt for the laying on of hands and I felt the burden, the weight, of those hands upon me) I was a man without honor but now I have found it. I have begun to love the honor of God."

Pray for these elders and deacons! Pray for them every day! Pray for them by name!
Ask God's blessing to rest upon them! Pray for God's Spirit to fill them! Get to know them!
Let them get to know you! Let them touch your life! Let God touch your life and fill you with his Spirit through them.

Lewis B. Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?*

Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

Karl Barth, "My Times are in Your Hands" in *Call For God*.