

**The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square
August 26, 2007 (13th Sunday after Pentecost)
By the Reverend Meg Buerkel
“A Healing Touch!”**

Jeremiah 1:4–10 Psalm 71:1–6 / Hebrews 12:18–29 / Luke 13:10–17

On January 6, 2005, I was ordained here in this church. It was a wonderful celebration of Epiphany – that day we remember the wise ones who brought gifts to the newborn king in the manger. This newborn priest also received many gifts, but the greatest of all has been the gift of sharing this ministry with you over the past three years. I will be ever grateful that Holy Trinity was grace-filled enough to support me, encourage me, indulge me, and to love me into the person (and priest) that I now am. Thank you.

Those of you present for my ordination may (or may not) remember that I asked my bishop if he would anoint and bless my hands as part of the service. Bishop Powell did – he took the holy oil and marked crosses over the palms of my hands and said prayers over them. This is not a typical part of the ordination service, but one I wanted to include because I had begun to glimpse the importance of hands in ministry. These hands have comforted the sick and dying. They have blessed and broken Holy Bread. They have held newborn babies for baptism. They have shaken most of your hands, and hugged quite a few of you. They have even done the seemingly less holy, like cleaning floors, flipping burgers, answering telephones, taking pictures.

There is something special about our hands, besides the fact they (with their opposable thumbs) separate us from the rest of the species... our hands are vital in our communication with others. Through our touch, we communicate the tender love necessary to raise children; the passionate love that binds intimate relationships; the compassionate love shared amongst friends. Likewise, with our touch, with our hands, we are capable of communicating hatred and malice and disdain. Touch is a fact of our incarnational existence. Our bodies were created by God – by the God who said to Jeremiah ‘I formed you in the womb’ – they are an integral part of who we are... we are not souls housed in matter, nor spirits trapped in the

physical. We are meant to be whole and unified physical–spiritual beings.

Perhaps this is what made Jesus take note of the bent–over woman in the synagogue that Sabbath day. Here was a woman unable to stand up straight because she had been – in Jesus’ words “bound by Satan for eighteen long years.” Her physical frame was bent and broken. Many of us here today are also bent and broken, our ailments just aren’t as apparent as this woman’s. We carry great weight upon our shoulders, we are overwhelmed by our circumstances, we suffer from medical ailments, we are stressed by expectations around us, we carry the repercussions of poor decisions from our past, we are crushed by our own sin. Most of us probably are thankful that our bent brokenness is not obvious to those around us, as that would mean acknowledging our weakness, our need for help, our dependence on others.

Here, in today’s gospel, this bent woman doesn’t ask to be healed. I wonder if that is because she has suffered for so long that she has simply forgotten what it was like to stand up straight? There are people who forget what it is like NOT to suffer. But Jesus sees her – and her bent brokenness – and responds, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment!” and he lays his hands upon her. He touches her. His touch straightens her frame, lifts her spirit, frees her, and she begins praising God.

The story of the bent woman echoes our first reading – the call of Jeremiah. Here is a baby prophet, afraid... afraid to go to God’s people... afraid to speak... afraid to carry God’s message. Here is another person who doesn’t ask to be touched by God – and is nevertheless touched by God. God “put out God’s hand and touched [Jeremiah’s] mouth, saying, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth.’” And great power is passed in that touch – Jeremiah is appointed by God “over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” and all without the fear that inhibited him initially.

What is it that binds you this day? What is it that burdens this church? What is it that frightens our society? That weighs humanity down? What is it that prevents the reign of God from breaking in right here and right now? These are our burdens. These are our sins. This is where we fall short of the glory of God. This is where we are bent, as individuals, as a church, as a society, as humankind.

But, we are here in the right place. Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." (Mt 11:28) We have come. We have come to the Lord who releases us from our burdens and gives us the strength and power to stand straight. We have come to the God who heals through Word and touch.

Yes, all of this is possible... we all too often perversely wish to suffer in silence. Or we walk past someone else who is burdened. We withhold our touch. We withhold our eyes. We withhold our voices. God is capable of doing all of this... but, God needs us...

As St Teresa of Avila wrote in the 16th Century: " Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now."

We are recipients of God's powerful healing. And we are to participate in this healing. God needs us. God needs our hands. God needs our eyes. God needs our voices. God needs us to bring about healing; to alleviate fear; God needs us to help straighten what is bent, to share one another's burdens, to speak up and out without fear. God needs us here and now to be healed and to be healers. Amen.

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