

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025 ***The Hand of the Lord***

Our hands are amazing instruments. When our hands are working properly, they showcase the amazing feat of the Lord's engineering, capable of an intricate series of movements made possible by articulating joints between twenty-seven bones and the more than thirty muscles that move them. Even seemingly simple movements can be quite complex. Recent research has determined that the fastest accelerating part of the human body is not the blink of an eye. The snapping of your finger is twenty times faster, taking just seven milliseconds to travel from the thumb to the palm.⁵ Our hands are truly amazing.

Our hands can do so much. We use them for work, for sports, for crafts, and on and on. In fact, hands are almost universally recognized as the symbols of our work, action, power, and control. The hands' controlling capabilities, powerful potential, and authoritative actions are not governed by our hands themselves. These gifts, which are ours by way of these instruments of the human body, ultimately flow from the heart. We know too often

⁵ Raghav Acharya, Elio J. Challita, Mark Ilton, and M. Saad Bhamla, "The Ultrafast Snap of a Finger Is Mediated by Skin Friction," *The Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 18, no. 184 (November 2021), April 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2021.0672>.

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

how these gifts of the Lord can be used to either give or take, build or break.

Jesus, in our Gospel this evening, mentions hands. He says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3). This text comes to us from the Sermon on the Mount. Before we can tackle this text, we have to go back to the beginning of this great sermon in chapter 5. Jesus is addressing His disciples while a great crowd is overhearing. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Jesus’ disciples are the “poor in spirit” who have nothing to offer God. They have only empty hands. However, the Lord has filled those hands with His good gifts. The same is true for you, brothers and sisters in Christ! You had nothing to bring before God to merit blessing because of sin. And yet, Jesus has exchanged that sin, taking it to the cross, and filled your hands with His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. You have this promise. It is completely dependent on your gracious and merciful Lord. In Christ, your hands are full!

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

In our text for this evening, Jesus says, “When you give to the needy . . .” It is not a question of whether Jesus’ disciples will be using their hands to help the needy or to do good for the sake of others. On the one hand, it was already an expectation among the Jews that almsgiving would be done. On the other hand, regarding what Jesus is giving you, empty hands that have been filled with the Gospel simply will share both the gifts of creation and salvation with other empty, outstretched hands. While it is true that one does not need to be a Christian to give earthly gifts to the needy, Jesus is saying that the heart of the Christian life of giving is completely different. And He is using poignant language to do it.

Jesus starts by contrasting the hypocrites who trumpet their deeds for the synagogue and streets. They give to others only so that everyone else can see them and praise them. They seek the rewards of the world because they close their hands to God’s gifts and promises. Nobody likes a braggart. We know all too well what it means to seek the praises of this world. We know it when we see it in people who love to trumpet their successes so as to hold the

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

rewards or praises before the world like a trophy in their hands, saying, “Look at the good that I am doing!” If we are honest, we see that same desire in ourselves. But those rewards still fade.

Jesus’ words grab hold of the heart of the matter. It’s one thing to sound the trumpet to let others know what you are doing, but don’t think for a moment that keeping your good deeds to yourself gets you off the hook. Jesus says, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”! On the one hand, the moment that we start to dwell on what our hands are doing, we take our focus off our neighbor and his or her needs in order to make our giving all about ourselves. Our neighbor is no longer best served. On the other hand, there is the greater spiritual concern. Our sinful condition has so distorted our lives that we can outwardly appear humble, keeping our giving to ourselves, but inwardly be brimming full of arrogant pride in the work of our own hands. It may not look like the praise of others. But it is the praise of self, a reward that also soon fades. Closing our hands to God’s gifts in order to quietly praise ourselves leads us to the same place as the hypocrites. Jesus

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

shows us that our sin is much worse than what we do or don't do with our hands. Even anonymously giving to the needy can be distorted into our own selfish praise.

The real problem is a heart condition. Jesus says, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matthew 15:19–20). This condition of the heart puts us in the throes of judgment and death. That is what we are reminded of this evening on Ash Wednesday. As you received the ashes on your forehead, you heard the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We die because we are sinners, plain and simple. If our lives were left in our own hands—as amazing instruments as they may be—the only reward that we will have earned is God's judgment and wrath.

However, this evening, we heard the words from Joel: "'Yet even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments'" (Joel 2:12–13). The recognition of sin is

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

not merely something that we can take into our hands by an outward display of contrition. The Lord is calling sinners to true repentance of the heart.

David also knew this heart condition. He wrote about it in Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (v. 10). David knew that he could not heal himself by the work of his hands. He needed the hand of the Lord. He needed the expert physician who is able to create a clean heart to blot out David's iniquities, to restore the joy of the Lord's salvation.

In Matthew 9:12, Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." If you are like David and know that your heart is not well, then hear the words of Jesus. He has come for you as the only one who can cure the sinful disease of the heart. He has come as the good physician who is able to give you a new heart and make it beat in His expert hands according to the steady rhythm of God's mercy. And He continues to give and hold your heart captive in His hands.

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

How has He done it? How is it that He gives and gives? Christ is your Lord and the Great Physician who has come to bring you life in Him. He did so by the work of His hands, purely out of love for you. He has selflessly given His very life for us. His right and left hands were stretched far apart upon the cross for you; His death for your life. He has taken your sins upon Himself all the way to death on the cross. God has taken your sin and put it out of His memory. Your sin is now as far from you as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). In return, He has filled your empty hands with His forgiveness. He has taken care of not only the sinful deeds of your hands but also the sinful condition that lies in your heart. He does so to create a new heart within you. He has given you a heart that does not need to remark on what your hands are doing. Christ has done it all.

With your new heart, you know that your empty hands have been filled with God's good gifts and are not concerned with rewards of praises from others or ourselves. You have the reward from your Father who sees in secret. Now, as you live your life, as you give

Ash Wednesday – March 5th, 2025
The Hand of the Lord

to the needy, as you share the Gospel of Jesus with others, keep your right hand and left hand ignorant of each other in daily repentance. Your giving is the Lord's work through you. Remember that there is no need to gain the rewards in this life through the works of your hands because you already have the reward of your Father who sees in secret.

Indeed, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." With those words, you received the sign of the cross pressed upon your brow this evening as a reminder that your life has been marked and sealed by the redeeming hand of your crucified and risen Lord. And soon as you come to this altar with empty hands, the Lord will fill them with His very body and blood, given and shed for you.

AMEN