

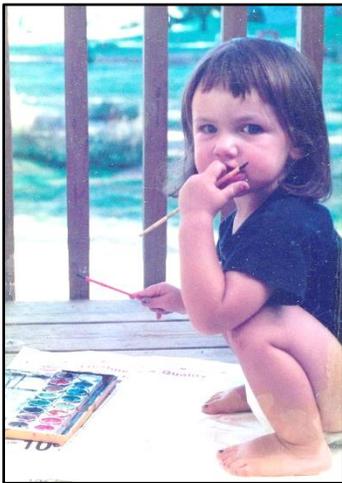
DIRTY HANDS

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Matthew 4: 12-23, January 26, 2020



May your words become flesh in our lives – with the stories we tell and the prayers we sing. Amen.



Our granddaughter, Johanna, is an elegant young woman in her 20's; however, one Sunday morning when she was still in diapers, she created a watercolor painting before she dressed for church. I didn't notice until she was at the altar to receive her blessing that the hands she lifted up – with all the exuberance of a toddler – were quite colorful. She had come to Christ's table with dirty hands.

The book of Matthew offers a brief vignette about Peter, Andrew, James, and John, fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, who walked away from their nets, their boats, their father, and their lives to follow Jesus. They came to him without so much as the *simplest* understanding of a ministry to "fish for people", its eventual consequences for each of them, or the benefit each would offer the world – but they took a leap of faith and followed him anyway, *and* they smelled of fish. They didn't even wash up before they offered their lives to Jesus. They had come to Christ with dirty hands.

Each of us comes to Christ's table in a similar state. We carry a bit of dirt under our nails with the imperfect humanity we offer our world. Last summer I spent some time with inmates at Stafford Creek Correctional Center where Steve once served as the chaplain supervisor. I met men who do their best to make meaning of their lives during their many years of incarceration given in return for having dirtied their hands by various significant actions. Though I haven't failed society or myself in *obvious* ways, I recognize the fears and regrets that have stopped me in my tracks – and the guilt that has propelled me forward ... evidence of *my* dirtied hands. There are challenges in each of our lives that cause us to hesitate and those that threaten to draw us into a dark place. But still, you and I come to Christ every time we heed the call to offer our beautifully unique, flawed ministries for the people and causes we most care about – and, in Steve's words last Sunday – when we heed the call to enter into relationship.

So, what if I *should* manage to get my hands clean for you, God? What will that achieve? Will I be blessed, or will I play the fool?

Though unsubstantiated, St. Teresa of Avila reportedly had a terse conversation with God after a particularly difficult time doing his bidding when she asked, “Why, God, do you persist in putting obstacles in my path ... the path I believe you want me to follow?” God answered, “This is the way I treat my friends.” Teresa responded, “It’s no wonder, then, that you have so few.”

Mary, the mother of Jesus, responded to the call of God with a fervent, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your Word.” But Mary’s reality is that of a teenager who is unmarried and pregnant. She knows women are stoned for this, and that families are disgraced. That knowledge alone would throw any 13-year-old girl into a state of adolescent angst. She carries an extraordinarily heavy burden and hopes for the best – for herself and for her unborn child, in spite of the reality each *will* face – Mary, the favored one, essentially agrees to a two-fold scandal: She will give birth to a child conceived out of wedlock who will be executed as a criminal for his social and political words and actions. Both get their hands clean for God, and at what cost? And for what benefit?

Unlike St. Teresa, Mary, and the rest of us, Jimmy Stewart’s character, George Bailey, does get to see what Pottersville would have been like had he chosen a different path in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George gets the unique opportunity to see what the people in his world would have faced if they had been made to live without him ... without his ministry ... if he hadn’t made those daily choices to get and keep his hands clean – in spite of his life’s challenging predicaments, its tight finances, and the loose endcap at the foot of the staircase that had represented for George a failed life ... until he saw the benefits of his daily words and actions.

You and I don’t get to see all the consequences of our humanity. We don’t have the insight that can only come from hindsight. We don’t *get* to see clear evidence that the choices we make today may cause anguish *and* reap benefits that will live *beyond* us. So, each of us, along with the stories of our lives, chisels out daily thoughts, words, and deeds for ourselves and for others – present and future. We live our lives the best we know how, hoping to choose moments of courage and to avoid years of regret. Like Johanna as a toddler, who came to Christ’s table with dirty hands, Peter, Andrew, James, John, and the rest of that gloriously flawed gang of 12 made plenty of *dirty* mistakes living the best lives they knew how. We hope to get *our* hands as clean as we can ... for a future we can’t entirely envision, and for God, who uses the heartfelt work of our flawed, dirty hands for good. Thank goodness. Amen.