

Grandma's Hands

November 6, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Philippians 2: 1-9

All week long, as I've been getting ready and excited for this service, I've been hearing a song in my head by the late, sweet baritone soul singer Bill Withers. No, it's not his famous *Lean on Me*, though that would be a good one given the day we have ahead. It's his song, *Grandma's Hands*. Do you know it?

Um, mm.

*Grandma's hands, clapped in church on Sunday morning
Grandma's hands, played a tambourine so well
Grandma's hands, used to issue out a warning
She'd say, Billy don't you run so fast
Might fall on a piece of glass
Might be snakes there in that grass
Grandma's hands*

His grandma's soothed "a local unwed mother," "used to lift her face and tell, Baby, grandma understands, put yourself in Jesus' hands". The lyrics end on this line, fitting for today:

*But I don't have Grandma anymore,
if I get to heaven I'll look for
Grandma's hands.
Um, mm.*

I don't know about you, but I think of my grandma every All Saints Sunday. And until today, I'd never thought of our Puppet Saints oversized hands in this way, as being symbols of a big, warm welcome to the proverbial other side, yet it fits, right? Well... heartfelt thanks to our Stewardship team for giving us this theme for the Stewardship season and for today – Lend A Hand – and thanks to the Spirit for so aligning things on this All Saints Sunday.

In our passage, Paul exhorts that First Church in Phillipi, and by extension, this First Church in Cambridge, first to take stock of how much communal life means to us, and how much Jesus's example means. He then exhorts us to lean on each other, to lean into our spiritual friendships, to set aside our own needs, and always be willing to lend a hand. In other words (and in other translations), he says: go ahead and 'let the same mind that was in Christ be in you!' He goes on to quote an ancient hymn that carries the message: Live selflessly. Die selflessly. Humble ourselves as Christ did and we too will be lifted up on the last day, such that even the saints of old, those long ago dead and buried, will adore us!

I want us to stay with this image of hands and imagine when it is that we first learn what it means to give and receive and share something. Maybe when we were toddlers? The exchanges likely start with our parents or grandparents or friends. My grandma, Daisy Smith, grew up poor in Paterson NJ. She worked in a silk factory there, then in nursing homes. She and her strong hands taught me so much. She

died when I was 8 but man do I remember her love ...and, when I think about it, I can remember and almost feel her hands. Before I started pre-school, I'd go to her house every Wednesday when my mom worked in a medical office and my dad was home writing his sermons. She'd care for me, throw me Whiffle balls with her hands, turn my piddly little 5-foot grounders into balls that I "hit all the way to China," as she would say. We'd play go fish. She'd mash potatoes and turn her potato masher into a make-believe stoplight by sticking different cut-out pieces of green, red and yellow construction paper at the end. My family would then come over and gather at her place for a meal every Wednesday night, and it would often include others who just needed to eat.

Hands not only connect us when we meet people for the first time. It's through exchanges that involve our caring, giving, lending, praying, playing, healing and feeding hands that we love and pass down feasts, music, ritual, and culture from generation to generation. Of course, hands can be used to harm as well but Paul is not about that here in his mention of lending hands. Again, he's inviting us to be like Jesus, and let's just ponder that for a moment. Not his mind, but his hands, and what they did. They touched lepers, healed, they broke bread and fed. They blessed children, they wiped tears when he wept, they prayed, they bled, they were held out to Thomas, bid people to follow and so much more.

To be honest, we don't usually go with such embodied metaphors on All Saints Sunday. We usually celebrate the great spiritual cloud of witnesses that surrounds and encourage us even now, yet to remember the hands and bodies of our benevolent and spiritual ancestors, what they have held and carried and handed on invites us to honor this day and our relationships with all those we've lost in a more tangible way.

One more quick story that a few of you heard me share at the NAACP panel we co-hosted here in late September. The week before, I was in a workshop in which we were invited to pair off with someone and face them as we were led in a guided meditation. First, we were asked to imagine that we were ancestors, saints if you will that had already passed on, and that we were sitting across from a descendant who was living 200 years in the future! We were asked to suspend our disbelief around two things: first that humans would still be alive 200 years from now despite the climate crisis and whatever else, and second that America had finally come through a major, federally embraced, and funded process of truth-telling and repair. Imagine that! We all had to dig deep to do so. The descendants we were facing wanted to know from us what it was like way back then in 2022 - what decisions we made, what we had to give up to be part of setting those early decades of change, turmoil, and backlash, yes, but apparently truth-telling liberation in motion. We then switched roles. And the second part of the exercise was to imagine we were sitting across from a benevolent ancestor from 200 years ago. We were asked to tell them what we needed from them, what strength, what courage, what stories, songs, and examples to keep us going in the work today. Suffice it to say, it was a powerful experience, and it was gift not unlike our All Saints Sunday tradition and scripture for today.

It's all a beautiful invitation to see our lives and our choices, even about how we spend our money, give, share and sacrifice of ourselves, in a stream of generations and communities - handing down care, love, beauty, wisdom, justice, and joy. Yes, we need hands and bodies on the line, getting out the vote this week, and yet even there, how much stronger will efforts be if we ground our efforts in the work and songs of our ancestors, including women and white leaders and multi-racial leaders, who marched hand-in-hand, in Seneca Falls and Selma, to secure rights that are at grave risk of being compromised today.

Friends, we need our ancestors, and dreams of our descendants and our Precious Lord to take our hands now as ever to see us through this rising storm and night, and with that allow me to introduce a powerful slideshow our Stewardship team had prepared for us today. Issa Bibbins recorded the soundtrack a few weeks back. It's *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* or Hymn 470 in case you don't know the words. As you listen and watch, and it's a few minutes long, I invite you to sink in, remember and give thanks for all that hands that guide us and hold us and that we hold dear - for Jesus hands, for your Grandma's hands, for your children's hands, for Pauline's hands, or for the hands of whatever saints you are remembering today. And, consider your own hands as well, some of which will be pictured here. These are all part of a wondrous, ever-flowing stream of God's self-giving love that flows in and through us from generation to generation. May our precious God take our hands even now. May we all lend our hands willingly and joyfully until at the last day we too meet our ancestors and greet our descendants in a world made whole by love.

