

Christmas Sunday: God's Hands

Jamaica Plain, December 21, 2008, Rev. Terry Burke

"Whose hands are God's hands but our hands?" Theresa of Avila, the 17th century Spanish nun who said that, was a great doer. She was busy starting convents, writing books, trying to reform her church, and fending off the Inquisition. I used her quotation in my ordination years ago, and it makes me think of using our hands for comforting the grieving, feeding the poor, visiting the prisoners, for loving and working for justice.

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Bettenhausen reminds us that for a small child at Christmas, "God's my size!" The hands of a baby like Maddie are also God's hands. We think of a person as a strong woman, a capable man, someone who is independent. Bettenhausen points out that an infant, totally dependent, is still fully human, still fully a person, still able to embody God.

Last Friday I flew out to Michigan to say goodbye to my aunt, Helene Burke. Thankfully, she was alive when I arrived that night at the St. Francis Home, and was still conscious. She mostly slept while I sat with her on Saturday, as staff came by to say goodbye to her, telling me how many lives she had touched.

I was present when the priest came to give her the sacrament of healing and reconciliation, "last rites." I proudly told him that Helene had a plenary indulgence from Pope John XXIII. John initiated the Vatican II reforms, blessed a circus because it made people happy, and told one of my favorite jokes: "How many people work at the Vatican?" "About half."

Helene's plenary indulgence was in effect a papal "ticket to Heaven." Once, a priest friend of hers was driving around a visiting cardinal, and told the hierarch about Helene. He later arranged the honor in Rome. As long as she didn't kill someone or renounce her faith, she was in. I mentioned this to someone and received the shocked response, "That's

why there was a Protestant Reformation!" To be fair, in the Middle Ages the indulgences were SOLD. Helene deserved to be honored - she worked countless volunteer hours helping the mentally ill in a 12-step-like program. I remember the irritation of my family when she would receive calls from those in need during our Christmas Eve celebrations.

When my brother Tim and I were children, we would stay overnight with Helene and her sister Catherine. They told us stories, read us books, and made us pancakes wrapped around sausages. They took us on trips and to museums and simply loved us. The last of her generation, Helene at 89 years had had a heart attack, after a series of strokes. She also had pneumonia, sometimes called "the old person's friend."

The nurses commented how calm she was, not at all anxious. "She's ready to go." Having seen our children's births, I was reminded again that birth and death look a lot alike. The labor of one leads to a new life, the labor of the other to some other form of life we don't understand, life with God. So at the end, Helene the doer for others was dependent, like a newborn. She slept surrounded by care and love.

The evening after her death, my brother and I felt raw and exhausted. To care for us, Tim's wife Cindy made us watch the movie Elf, which Tim said would lower our IQ by at least five points. It's a very sweet movie and made us laugh; we weren't feeling very strong and independent.

This weekend's heavy snow storm reminds us of our dependence - you can't have the school program with 10" of snow. This season, many capable, independent people are struggling with having lost their jobs. We all need each other; buy your friend who's unemployed a coffee gift card for Fiorie's or JP Licks.

When I learned that I needed to fly to Michigan, I had 50 minutes to book a flight, rent a car, and throw clothes in a suitcase, before driving off to T.H. Green in Providence. At the airport I had to call people and ask them to cover responsibilities that were mine; I had to be dependent. Thank you to all who helped out! Now that I'm back, I've had to let

go of being self-sufficient regarding personal Christmas things. People will get cards and gifts during the 12 days of Christmas.

This year, I've already received two wonderful Christmas presents: I was able to say "Thank you" to my aunt and to spend time with my brother Tim. Someone once asked, "What present did Jesus give? Himself." It's like the old Christmas song, "All I Want For Christmas Is You."

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Holy Child, wholly dependent. If God can be dependent, who can't we be too? Our hands are God's hands when we use them to help, show love, and work for justice. But they are also God's hands when they are held for us by a loved one, when we receive care and compassion. Christmas reminds us that we are all connected in the mystery of life and death, held by Love and Light.