

**Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – February 4, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

Today is the great national celebration of football – or, as most of us know it, that event being broadcast in between the commercials. Even those of us who are waiting patiently for baseball’s Spring Training to begin will turn on the actual game – if not the pre-game shows that I think have already begun or the endless post-game analysis. To cover all of those hours of television, the commentators will give us every meaningless statistic and repeat every cliché. Football, we will be reminded, is a game of inches, is a game of momentum. Victory will depend upon the strength of the offensive line, the power of the blitz, the performance of the special teams. And much will be made of the passing arms of Tom Brady and Nick Foles (I admit that I had to look up that name). The winner may well be determined by the accuracy of their arms. Now I suspect that those quarterbacks might remind us that their arms are only half the battle. It matters not if the pass is perfectly thrown if the receiver doesn’t catch it. So victory may depend not only on passing ability, but also on the skilled hands of the receivers.

Hands are not only important in football. We depend upon the skilled hands of carpenters and of surgeons, on the talented hands of artists and musicians, on the compassionate hands of nurses and parents. Human hands can be used in so many ways – to communicate, to build or to destroy, to harm or to heal.

Today, in a passage from the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, we hear about the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Yes, he preached. He called the disciples. As we heard last week, he taught in the synagogue with authority and drove out an unclean spirit. But today’s gospel – and that of next Sunday – bring us an important aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus in those earliest days: he cured the sick. Today, he cured Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and, when the whole town had gathered outside the door, Mark tells us that Jesus cured many who were sick. Now it is important to put that into context. In our world of advanced medicine, with drug stores on every corner and emergency rooms and trauma centers just a phone call away, healing doesn’t seem like such a miracle. Paying for it may be a miracle – but these days healing seems to be just a matter of finding the right combination of antibiotics and pain relievers. It wasn’t like that in first century Palestine. Probably three or four of every ten children died before they were one year old. Of those who made it out of infancy, fifty was considered old and living to sixty or beyond was extremely rare. Any disease could kill you – and those doctors who were around might attempt a remedy that would kill you faster than the ailment they were supposed to be treating. Given the scarcity of actual medical treatment, it is no wonder that people felt as Job did in our first reading: “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle; they come to an end without hope.” Yes, hope was in short supply.

In Jesus' time, it was a miracle if you survived getting sick – and even more of a miracle if you were cured. So into this environment came Jesus, one who taught with authority, but more importantly, one who offered the people something they could really use – one who offered healing. No wonder the whole town was gathered outside the door.

And how did Jesus heal? Mark tells us that he approached Simon's mother-in-law who was in bed with a fever. He grasped her hand and helped her up. In this account, Jesus spoke not a word, performed no surgery, gave her no injection or oral medication. He merely took her hand into his. He cured her with his hand, with his touch. We read that Jesus grasped her hand and we hardly give the gesture a second thought – but in the ancient world, that gesture was profound. First, a Jewish man of that time would not touch any woman other than his wife, and perhaps his mother. Certainly he would not touch a woman he had never met. More than that, no one – man or woman – would touch the sick, for fear of ritual impurity to be sure, but out of an abundance of caution. They may not have understood much in the ancient world, but they understood that disease could be transmitted by touch. In the days before latex gloves and surgical masks, no one dared to touch a person who was sick for fear of contracting the same incurable disease. So when Jesus grasped the hand of Simon's mother-in-law, you can almost hear those in the house gasp in astonishment.

It is that same shocking gesture, that same outstretched hand of mercy and compassion that he offers to us. He offers us forgiveness and new life in the cleansing waters of baptism. He offers us healing and peace for our bodies and our souls in the sacraments of anointing of the sick and of reconciliation. And he offers us his very self – his Body and his Blood – as our nourishment here in the Eucharist. More than that, of course, he calls us to become what we receive, to become his Body – to bring his compassionate touch to the world.

As members of Christ's body, we are now invited to be his hands for the world. But too often we are challenged just to feel his touch ourselves. Jesus' was able to grasp the hand of Simon's mother-in-law as she lay ill with a fever. But he'd be hard pressed to grasp our hands when we have them firmly planted in our pockets of selfishness, when we have them occupied in other people's business, when our hands are too filled with the baggage of our lives that we cannot or will not let go. If we were running down the football field, wouldn't we be doing everything we could to be open to catching the ball? We wouldn't be running down the field carrying our wallet, or our resume, or our grudges, would we? As we live our lives – struggling with difficulties and searching for relief – as we live our lives, are we looking for the open hand of our Savior? Are our hands open to his healing touch? Or are we holding on to so much that we cannot grasp his merciful, outstretched hand?