

# HANDIWORK

A Sermon on Genesis 1:26-31—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart  
July 23, 2017—First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

Mangabeys, colobuses, lutungs, surilis, galagos, lorises, macaques, sakis, uakaris, capuchins, howlers, tamarins, bushbabies, gibbons, marmosets, bonobos, lemurs, baboons, orangutans, monkeys, gorillas, chimpanzees, and humans: All primates of the animal kingdom.

On the far wall of Yale Peabody Museum's hall of mammals, a sign reads:

"Primates use their hands to grasp, manipulate, and explore objects. The fingers have flat nails instead of claws and sensitive pads on the finger tips. The thumb is opposable, allowing primates to hold on to branches and to pick up small objects between the thumb and other fingers."

Humans, then, are not alone in using hands to impact their living conditions. We evolved from and alongside other creatures whose hands resemble ours enough that we can teach certain primates sign language and how to use some human tools.

But as far as we can tell, we humans are the only primates, and the only earthly creatures who connect our ability to create and manipulate the world with our own creation.

As we heard in the first creation story, the more orderly version, God says, "Let us (we presume the us is God and angels, or as Christian we may presume "us" is the Trinity) make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish, birds, cattle, baboons and monkeys.

So God created humankind in the divine image; in the image of God he created them.

In this creation story, God creates humankind in God's image. This makes total sense that we human creatures who have for so long been creative and productive, and have arguably advanced through that creativity, believe that we

are created in the image of a creative and productive God. Like creator, like creature. Creative.

Then in the second creation story, that focuses even more on the human part of creation, we hear that God forms Adam from the dust of the ground. I can't help but imagine God forming the first human figure with hands, scooping up dirt, making it muddy, and molding it, rolling it and pinching it—ears, those would be good, and hands like mine, with fingers, how many? Four? Six? Ahhh...Five.

God creates a partner, Eve, and things go well for about three verses before the serpent shows up in the garden to sow seeds of discord. One note: the serpent apparently had legs and paws or even hands until God gets through with cursing the serpent, specifying, now you're going to have to slither." Part of the serpent's curse is losing its handedness. But as for those humans, who until then only had to use their hands to grab whatever fruit—bar one—that they find in the garden, they use their hands to pick that singular forbidden fruit, and then having eaten it, use their hands to fashion fig wear for the now embarrassing parts of their bodies. God curses the first humans to not only to be mortal, but also to give birth to children and to toil over the earth with their own two hands to survive.

In other words, we can take away from the biblical creation stories that God intends for people, like it or not, to use their hands. People are for using their hands in wonderful creativity and in frustrating toil. Like God's creation of us, sometimes the wonder and frustration go, well, hand in hand.

Fast forward to today and the notion of using our hands has been altered, perhaps distorted, by human development, and in some cases by classism. For instance, my great-great grandfather

Ferber became a blacksmith in eastern Indiana just as pre-industrialism was giving way to the industrial age. It was of his kind of work that Longfellow wrote:

“Week in, week out, from morn till night,  
you can hear his bellows blow;  
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,  
with measured beat and slow,  
like a sexton ringing the village bell,  
when the evening sun is low.

Toiling—rejoicing—sorrowing,  
onward through life he goes;  
each morning sees some task begin.  
Each evening sees it close;  
something attempted, something done,  
Has earned a night’s repose.”<sup>i</sup>

A romantic vision of hard labor with the hands. But already by the time Longfellow wrote his poem and my ancestor retired, it was clear that such work was going out of fashion.<sup>ii</sup> Two generations later, the smithy’s grandson and my grandfather worked on an assembly line in a General Electric factory. But he didn’t want his kids to have to work in those conditions, and so it went that my uncle became a nuclear physicist, my aunt a social worker, and my mom a language teacher. They used their hands write and to play instruments. Less toil, but also less connection to creation and the earth.

Now our notion of how we might use our hands has a lot to do with classism, those dividing lines that we try not to admit exist in our communities, but do more or less. Even in a town like Milford where we have a great technical vocational high school, people from different classes tend to view working with your hands very differently. Some view working with hands with pride, enjoying to see the tangible difference made in handiwork; others view handiwork with something closer to disdain, or at least concern that such work might be dangerous, a burden on your body, or won’t earn a comfortable living.

But humans have hands that want to grasp and manipulate and explore. Hands that yearn from a young age to touch everything around them, to get dirty and make things. That yearning never goes away, it just gets pushed aside or under the surface.

The church can be that place where we acknowledge the dividing lines of class that have grown to view work and the use of our hands differently and to address those differences, to lift up the worth of bodily labor alongside information and service work, to lift up the worth of labor and creative arts are integral to our thriving as God’s children.

Lest we forget: Our boss is a Jewish carpenter.

We worship God through Jesus Christ, who is ever working with his hands.

Jesus uses his hands for years to do carpentry work;

and then, in his public ministry, Jesus uses his hands to express himself as he teaches and preaches.

Jesus uses his hands to bless little children.

Jesus uses his hands to heal.

Jesus uses his hands to serve, to wash people’s feet.

Jesus uses his hands to share the bread and the cup at the Last Supper.

Jesus uses his hands to be lifted up on a cross in his final earthly toiling.

And then, in John’s Gospel, Jesus even uses his hands to show Thomas that he indeed is the same Jesus, resurrected from the dead.

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes: “For we are God’s handiwork, created through Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

We are the body of Christ today. We are God’s handiwork and we are in a sense God’s hands, in our work and our ministry, blessing, healing, serving, embracing, lifting up Jesus with our hands,

our hearts, our voices, proclaiming the ultimate power and victory of God even over death through not just what we say but also especially through what we do.

When we send our youth group on work mission trips around the country, we lift up the value of working with your hands for its own sake and for the sake of sharing God's love.

When we hold hands with those who are sick in body or in spirit as we pray with them, we lift up the work that those hands have done over the years and how much it means to keep the circle unbroken on this earth.

When we dip our hands into the baptismal waters we form this community in God's love

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<sup>i</sup> From *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1893), pp. 14-15, cited in *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, Mark R. Schwein and Dorothy C. Bass, ed. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2006), pp. 281-283.

remembering our creation and the cleansing forgiveness and new life that God offers each of us. When we take our hands to break bread and serve communion, to pass the plates with bread and cups, we share in God's work of valuing each and every one of God's children as a recipient of that sacrificial meal. We do it with our own hands. Sensitive, creative instruments of God's peace and love.

The good news is that we have the work of Jesus' hands that save us, so that while we may have to toil on this earth it is also a blessing to create and produce as creatures in creation. We are all held in the gracious and loving hands of God who created us, redeems us, sustains us, now and forever. Amen.

<sup>ii</sup> My great-great-grandfather's blacksmith tools were donated to the Allen County-Fort Wayne History Center where they remain to this day an exhibit of the kind of early industrial work that was more common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.