

## **Homily – The Hands of the Baby Jesus**

**Rob Keim**

**December 24, 2019 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

Two thousand years ago, when Jesus was born, he did not know he had hands.

Jesus didn't know he had hands.

Four months ago, our first grandchild, Carter, was born, and I am becoming an expert, once again, on infants. I seem to be paying more attention this time, and I am realizing things that I did not realize twenty-seven years ago when my daughter was born.

I remember that newborn babies were lumps for the first few weeks, and that they couldn't see much. But, with our grandson, I am amazed to learn that babies are clueless about their hands. They might wave them around, but newborn babies have no idea they have hands.

At four months, Carter is now grasping things, and he has been sticking his hands in his mouth for about a month. Of course, our grandson is very advanced for his age, but use of hands is a learned skill. For me, this is a reminder that most of what we do is a learned response.

And even when medieval painters would paint the baby Jesus as just a little adult, in reality he was a baby just like Carter – and just like your children and grandchildren. The baby Jesus was not born with infinite knowledge. He was not born as an adult. He was born as a baby. And, this means Jesus was born not knowing he had hands.

Two thousand years ago, that baby the shepherds found in the manger looked, and sounded, and smelled, and tasted, and felt just like every other healthy baby.

And, just like us, Jesus had to learn all of the things we have to learn. Jesus had to learn how to crawl, and walk, and talk, and relate to others. He had to learn how to read and write, and do so many of the same things that we have to learn.

Now, as the perfect union of God and human, there are some things that Jesus knew how to do that most of us don't know how to do. The miracles come to mind, but there is also the wisdom of Jesus. He seemed to always know just the right thing to do, and he tried to teach this to the rest of us.

And, I'm guessing that Jesus sometimes made mistakes. His spelling and grammar were probably wrong at times. He probably had accidents. But, traditionally we say that Jesus had no sin. He never turned away from God, and he was really good at relationship with God, others, and self.

And, let's not forget the resurrection, and Jesus' ability to forgive.

Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Jesus came into the world as the perfect union of God and human, but he was also a newborn baby who did not know he had hands. He had to learn and develop.

Twenty-first century medical science has a lot of data about normal development rates for babies. While there is some normal variation, babies learn to turn over at about four months and walk at about twelve months. And, potty training seems to be at about three years. Brain development and physical development all seem to have a normal cycle in childhood and on into adulthood. Jesus probably had this same development as an adult.

Sometimes we think there is an age in which development stops. But, I heard an fascinating article on Ted Talk Radio last week that says we continue to have significant shifts about every ten years.

Dan Gilbert is a professor of psychology at Harvard, and he has done a lot of research into how our personalities change profoundly over the course

of our lives. We don't think that's the case. But what he has shown is that, more or less, every ten years, who we are – our personalities, our values change a lot.

According to Professor Gilbert, “the person we were ten years ago, has a hard time imagining who we are going to be. And, then we mistakenly think that because it's hard to imagine, it's not likely to happen. In actuality, when people say, I can't imagine that, they are usually talking about their own lack of imagination and not about the unlikelihood of the event that they're describing.

The bottom line is, time is a powerful force. It transforms our preferences. It reshapes our values. It alters our personalities. We seem to appreciate this fact, but only in retrospect. Only when we look backwards do we realize how much change has happened in a decade.

Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished. The person you are right now is as transient, as fleeting and as temporary as all the people you've ever been. The one constant in our life is change.”

And here is the challenge that I want to lay before you today. As we imagine our future self, I think our goal of transformation should be to become more like Jesus.

I know that as the Church, and as followers, of Jesus, we have done some bad things, but Jesus is still the model of who we should want to become. Imagine the possibility.

While Jesus was the perfect union of God and human, he was also completely human, just like us. My hope, my prayer, my invitation is for you to embrace the capacity and beauty, which God has already created within you to be more like Jesus.

Earlier I shared my amazement that babies have to learn they have hands, and then how to use them.

In the same way, I wonder if there are things God has built into us that most of us still don't realize we have. What are the hands that we don't know we have? Imagine how ten years from now you will be transformed.

Now, theosis is a theological term from the Eastern Orthodox Church which means that through the acceptance of the Holy Spirit, human beings are capable of reaching upwards toward God. And, empowered to become more like Jesus.

The good news we have from Jesus is that we can experience real and transformative union with God. In fact, this is the supreme goal of human life and the very meaning of eternal life. Theosis does not mean we become God, but that we participate in God's nature. Theosis is not about replacing our human nature with a fully divine nature. Instead it is about growing within our very earthiness and embodiedness to live more and more in the ways of love and grace. Don't you want this for the person you will be in ten years? Don't you want it now?

Furthermore, most of us imagine God as being somewhere "out there." We must shift from thinking of God as "out there" to also knowing God "in here." Only inner experience can heal the false split that we put between divine and human. There are many contemplative spiritual practices that can help you focus on inner experience.

In January our confirmation class will include basic training on these spiritual practices. And, in March, during Lent, we will have a series of classes on spiritual practices that help you develop your interior life and transform your way of being.

Do you want this transformation?

Transformation comes when you realize that God has already made you with the capability to be in union with God. Transformation comes when you realize you don't need to earn this union and God's love. Transformation comes when you accept that there is nothing you can do to

increase God's love for you. And, there is nothing you can do to decrease God's love for you. Transformation comes when you realize you still have spiritual hands you are not using.

Here is a quote by Marianne Williamson to articulate this point.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

What hands do you have that you are not yet using? Ten years from now how are you going to be more in union with God? What are you doing to recognize the presence of God that is already within each and every one of us?

Christmas is liminal time in which we remember that God has placed more beauty within us than we realize. Embrace the gift of beauty.

And, Merry Christmas!