

“Touching Hearts and Transforming Lives”
I I Corinthians 5:16-6:2

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At the tender age of eleven, my father and his three siblings were orphaned. His father died in the cold of winter. His mother fled for fear. The four children were left to fend for themselves. In a real drama of *Survivor*, my father set out the following spring to find work on farms as a hired hand. For 87 years now, he has dug out a living by the sweat of his brow. A few weeks ago, I sat by his hospital bed, holding his hand as he awakened from surgery. My father's hands are huge. If he ever gets you in his grip, you will never forget it. As I held his big, tough, calloused hands, I thought how they had provided and guided my life. I said a prayer of gratefulness that day.

You and I have a heavenly parent with huge hands. Sometimes we sing, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” The sculpture which graces our campus is a constant reminder of the hand of God reaching to us. Even before we reach out into the unknown, God is reaching out for us, **touching hearts and transforming lives**. I would like to talk with you about that today.

The hand of God is upon us. The hand of God is a **comforting** hand. In these treacherous days, I live in the Psalms. When nothing else helps, the Psalms calm my fears and restore my faith.

One of my favorite Psalms is the 139th. The ninth and tenth versus read, “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there God’s hand will lead me, and God’s right hand shall hold me fast.” Psalm 91 says, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. They will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” We cannot afford to live in fear. Whatever the news says to us, whatever the circumstances of life may be, we cannot afford to live in fear. Let us trust in God and not be afraid.

Gary Price, the sculptor for the work that is on our campus, writes this in his commendation, “This sculpture represents the very moment, the exact instant, when we have taken that incredible leap in faith, reaching out into the unknown in hope that we will find comfort, solace, peace, love and understanding. As we reach that milestone in our journey, we discover that we are not alone or forsaken at all. **The hand of God is upon us.**

I discovered that in a very personal way about eight years ago. I was wading through one of those dark nights of the soul. I had lived long enough for things to be together, but at the deepest places, the hurts remained. I was seeking the help of a Spiritual Director, who first introduced me to the writings of Henri

Nouwen. I will never forget reading that tiny little book of Nouwen's called *The Life of the Beloved*. My tears still stain the pages. In the second chapter he says this, "Well, you and I don't have to kill ourselves, you know. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved us or wounded us. That is the truth in our lives." So, listen to that voice with great inner attentiveness which says, "I have molded you in the depths of the earth, and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. You belong to me. We are one." **The hand of God is upon us.**

The hand of God is a **commissioning** hand. Psalm 31 says, "Our times are in God's hands." You are a child of the universe, no less than the moon and the stars. You have a reason to be here. Whether or not it is evident to you today, no doubt, your life is unfolding according to God's ultimate purpose.

Uncle Sam can take a piece of paper, stamp a portrait of Ben Franklin on it and make it worth \$100. That is called money. Bill Gates can sign his name to a check and make it worth billions of dollars. That is called wealth. Garth Brooks can sing a song and fill a coliseum with screaming fans. That is called talent. But, God Almighty can take a timid life, empower it with His spirit, and make that life a blessing to other people. That is called salvation.

Martin Luther once said, "I have held many things in my hands and have lost them all. But, whatever I have placed in God's hands, those things, I still possess." Over the last year, I have become convinced that God has called us together for such a time as this. Never, in my thirty plus years of ministry, have I sensed the calling so clearly, felt the passion so deeply, as I do today. **The hand of the Lord is upon us.** Let us rise to new levels of service to meet the spiritual needs of this community and the world.

We are at a pivotal point in the history of this congregation. I begin, today, to communicate a new vision of what God is calling us to be and do in the future of our lives together. **The hand of God is upon us.**

The hand of God is **extended through us**. Take a look at your hands. Really look at them. They may be wrinkled or scarred, smooth or rough, they may be big or small, they may be tender or tough. Maybe you are left-handed; maybe you are right-handed; maybe you are ambidextrous, but God needs your hands. He needs **your** hands. The old poem puts it this way:

"Christ has no hands, but our hands, to do his work today.

He has no feet but our feet, to lead others in his way.

We are the only Bible the careless world will read.

We are the sinner's Gospel, we are the scoffers creed."

I invite you to do something today. I invite you with one hand to reach out and touch the hand of God. The hand of God is reaching for you, as it is beautifully portrayed on our campus. It is, in real spiritual life, a true fact; God is reaching

for you. Long before you ever reach for him, God is reaching for you. With one hand, reach out and touch the hand of God, but with the other, connect with a friend.

Under the Almighty hand of God, we can be about the business of **Touching Hearts and Transforming Lives**. I hope those four words become such a part of our life together in the years ahead, that the moment you hear, “Brentwood United Methodist Church,” you immediately connect with it the vision of **“Touching Hearts and Transforming Lives.”** Let it be synonymous of our life together, touching hearts in the name of God.

Some of those hearts are children’s hearts. There is a tender moment in the Gospel when the parents bring their children to Jesus. “They brought them there that Jesus could touch them.” The Disciples, acting like the Secret Service, trying to keep Jesus on task and on time, rebukes the parents for this act of mercy and begin to tell them to, “Go away.” Jesus stops the whole show in the middle of the road and makes that profound statement that we say at every baptism, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Do you understand? If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to form a village. We had better be in the business of creating safe places for the children of the world. We cannot ignore the young ones inside and outside of our church that long for safety, security, and a word of hope in a broken community. Some have little or no family to surround them. It is not the school’s job, it is the church’s job to create safe places where children can be nurtured, loved, touched, and held in appropriate ways. “Let the children come.”

As our founder, John Wesley, was climbing the steps to the pulpit to preach one Sunday, there was a child sitting on the steps. Instead of asking the child to be moved, he reached out, picked up the little girl, held her in his arms, gave her a kiss, and set her back on the same step as he passed by to preach the sermon. Let that be an image of our lives together. Let the children come. Let them find in this place, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, extended family, and even old, gray-headed preachers, who love them, care for them, and nurture them in life. Only a touch, but what a powerful tool.

Touch does more than we can ever imagine. A simple touch can change a life. On the first day of an introductory speech class at a large, secular, university, the professor asked students to introduce themselves by answering two questions. “What do you like about yourself? What don’t you like about yourself?” Dorothy was sitting on the back row. Her long, red, hair covered almost all of her face. When at last, the question had moved through the class until it came to Dorothy, there was an awkward silence in the room. The professor walked back to Dorothy and repeated the question. With a deep sigh, Dorothy pulled back her hair revealing a large, irregularly shaped birthmark covering half her face. In despair she said to the professor, “This should tell you what I don’t like about myself. I

haven't found anything that I like." In the tension of the moment, that kind, Christian professor, who had been at it for thirty years, reached out and touched Dorothy on the cheek and said, "God and I like your face." That day, the tears washed her hurt away.

Touching hearts, touching people where they hurt. There are a lot princes who still think they are frogs. In fact, there may be a little frogginess in us all. A simple touch can turn a young person from self-hate to self-acceptance. We are in the business of touching people where they are.

A few years ago, a research project at Purdue University, had the librarians alternately touch and not touch the hands of students as they handed back their library cards. Guess what they found? They discovered in the research that those who had been touched reported far greater positive feelings about both the library and the librarian than those who had not been touched. The same kinds of studies have been done with physicians and patients, with the same results every time.

In a high tech world, I want to build a High Touch Church. I do not want anybody to ever say again, "I came to Brentwood United Methodist Church and nobody even spoke to me." Let it stop today!

Touching hearts. That is our business. Not with manipulation, but with compassion. **Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives.**

The hand of God is upon us and the hand of God is extended through us to touch where it hurts and to lead persons into a transformational experience of life.

Since I am from Kentucky, I can tell this story. A family from the hills of Kentucky made their way to the big city for the very first time. The father and son walked into a huge hotel where they encountered for the very first time an elevator. As they stood trying to make sense out of all those numbers above the doors, they noticed that two, frail, elderly, ladies went into the elevator. The doors closed, the numbers ran and in a very few moments the doors opened again and out stepped two lovely, young, women. "Did you see that, Pa?" asked the son. "Sure did," said the Dad. "Son, why don't you go out and get your Ma. Let's put her in there and see if that thing will do the same for her."

If transformation were a matter of outward appearances, we could have more exercise classes and employ more yoga instructors. We could send the staff for

cosmetic surgery. But, the transformation of which I'm speaking is a matter of the heart, not a matter of appearance.

Paul said it so well, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new. "To be in Christ" literally means, "to let the Spirit of Christ so infiltrate my heart and my life that the very essence of my being is transformed into Christ likeness." Anything less than that is selling the Church short. It is Saul, the persecutor, becoming Paul, the ambassador, for Christ. It is Peter, the shaky disciple, becoming Cephas, the Rock, for the early Church. In similar ways, God wants to transform our lives, from fear to faith, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, from being served to serving. Let me emphasize that, again. From being served to serving.

Lee Strobel spent the first part of his life as an atheist, an angry man. Today, he is an author and pastor of a local congregation. In his own writings he tells this story. "For years I would come home cursing and angry about things at work. One day, I came home so mad that I kicked a hole in the living room wall. I can only imagine what my five year old must have been feeling and thinking in those days at home. Then I became a Christian. I knew a real transformation had taken place in my life when five months after my conversion, Allison came to her mother and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what He did for Daddy sometime ago."

That is the kind of change we are talking about. You cannot add religion on to your life. You are too busy already. We are talking about reorienting. We are talking about changing. We are talking about transforming the very soul. Put on a new set of glasses through which to see the world. It is what Rabbi Kuschner said religion was anyway, "A set of glasses through which I see the reality of the world."

That is transformation. God loves us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. "For anyone who is in Christ, is a new creation."

Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives. With the help of God, we must extend the hand of God. Therein lies the picture of what I believe God's preferred future for us together may be. May God empower us to embrace it with all our hearts. Amen.