

Hold My Hand
October 8, 1967

As any old jazz man would have said “the joint was rocking –” the beat of the drums, the shriek of that amplified metal, colored lights licking the walls red and blue, and the shivering singer, singing not with but in, singing under, and singing around it all, singing “Hold my hand ... hold my hand ... hold my hand ... hold my hand ...,” like an endless pleading, an unbearable beseeching, from one elderly, one ancient adolescent, to a room packed with elderly, ancient adolescents – a pleading that was unheeded. For no hand held another, not in that room, not in closeness, not in tenderness, not in love, not in anything, not in anything human. The hands were all in the air, on the tops of the arms, looking for all the world like the fluttering heads of white snakes, charmed there by the music, moving – the hands were – but not touching, not in touch, not with one another – just floating. And yet the kid was singing for them all, for what they wanted, for what they needed, for what they’d missed, for what they’d asked for and never gotten: closeness, tenderness, love – that was honest, open, human. So the kid, old at 17, was singing it for them: “Hold my hand.” And nobody did. Not in that room.

You wonder why they must call themselves “Rolling Stones,” and “Beatles,” and “The Mamas and the Papas”? - Maybe it’s the way they see and make mock of themselves and what they never had ... or so I think. Isolation in crowds creates curious phenomena.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
And out of Egypt, I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me ...
Yet it was I too taught Ephraim to walk
I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I held them.
I led them with cords of compaction with bounds of love
And I became to them as one
Who eases the yoke on their jaws
And I bent down to them and fed them” Hos. 11:1-4

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Or if you fail that then understand this. A letter came the other day. It read like this. “Dear Doctor B: Between fighting the mud and the rats, and the V.C., there isn’t much time for writing or anything, except staying alive. This morning, another guy died in my arms. You know what he said to me? “Hey doc...” (I’m just a dumb medic, but they all call me ‘Doc.’ Makes me feel kinda good, like I’m supposed to really be something.) So he says to me, ‘Hey doc,’ and I bend down to him, thinking he was wanting another shot, and you know what he says to me? He’s just a kid like me, and he says to me – ‘Hold my hand.’ And I held both of his hands, like I was his brother, or his mother may be, or God, even. And his blood got all over me ...”

Don’t you see what that letter is saying? It wasn’t a whining, a complaining letter. Across

continents, it was saying: I'm young, and I'm scared, and I'm a long way from home, but, for the first time in my life, I'm needed, and I'm trying, I'm trying desperately to play the man. Hold my hand," mine too – "Hold my hand."

"For I the Lord, thy God will hold thy right hand,
saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee." Is. 41:15

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And here is a third one – if these 2 didn't get through to you. A Chicago juvenile delinquent, trying to explain himself to himself: It wasn't that I hated my folks. It was just that I always seem to be reaching out for them, and couldn't touch them. They gave me stuff, and all that, but I guess what I always wanted was them. I remember when I was little, I wouldn't want to now, not now. But when I was little and Dad and I would go places, and I was proud to be seen with him, for he was big, and people liked him, and I wanted them to know we belonged together, so I would try to ... well I would try to hold his hand, but it was like I wasn't there, or maybe he was ashamed of me, with my skinny legs and thick glasses, or maybe he didn't care, or didn't hear, or I don't know ... I am kind of thinking about it ..."

It was the story of his life – never anyone to hold his hand, so now he won't give it to anyone, except as a fist, or the back of his hand, in the face of society. And his parents still don't understand.

"Cast me not off, forsake me not,
O God of my Salvation!
For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the Lord will take me up." Ps. 27:9,10

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So you think this is silly and sentimental? Then you are right on one count and wrong on the other.

You are right about the sentiment. But it isn't silly. Sentiment forms a larger, a far larger share, of sanity in this world than most Presbyterians dare to believe. With our fine puritan guilt and fear, we beat a hasty retreat from life, close the windows on human beings, and when the bloody old world comes too close to us, says, "Hold my hand," we lose our heads, become hysterical, shriek, like maidens fleeing mice, "Touch me not!" Or we pretend boredom with the importuning world, mutter, "I want so much to be alone!" and then are desperately lonely ourselves and full of longing + wonder "why?" or we become hard and bitter and vindictive, and when life comes pleading, we say "what do you expect

me to do? You brought it on yourself. I'll not hold your hand. Hold your own – hands! Do what you've always done! Nothing! Or we turn on professional help, and we say, "I don't need you, don't want you, not your freaking sympathy. Get away!" But then, these hard, these bitter, these vindictive grow old, and from their beds reach out and say, "Hold my hand," and who listens? If they are fortunate, there is a paid nurse ...

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Do you think I have left or forgotten the faith I'm here to talk about? No, far from it. The old biblical faith is full of windows on human beings, all open, full of God and man, of each saying to all, and all to each, "Hold my hand," for the old faith is full of the needing of one another. It is foolish to be ashamed to say "Hold my hand" –

Our Lord was ever and always in touch, in literal touch, with the wanting world. Writes St Luke (18:15), "They even brought babies for him to touch." And he took them in his arms, and he placed his hands upon them, and he blessed them. The little master was not afraid of the world, did not shrink from it, draw back from it, not from Roman soldiers, or lepers, not from harlots, or rich Pharisees, or blind beggars. He was always reaching out to them, as they reached out to him. All his senses were alert to the tears and the laughter of the world, for he was not afraid to love. And when he found a life all primly closed, all shut off from human warmth and affection, a heart with no bridges to other hearts, he was sad and said, "Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is necessary." (i.e., "you have never learned to love.") (Lk 10:38b.)

This is why he could believe so easily and so naturally in the love and compassion of God, who holds out his hands to man, but makes no arbitrary demands. Our Lord himself was like this. He knew how and when to say, "Hold my hand." But he loved more wisely than we do. He knew when to let go too, and let a man be his own man, on his own. "Take up your own bed now – and walk" – you can do it. He trusted more and interfered less. He had that truest mark of parental love: the ability to wave goodbye but not forget, to let a child go, go to life, go to temptation, go to suffering, having done one's best, and no clutching, and no regrets.

Lines by Alan Paton, on his son coming of age, are worth remembering:

"I see my son is wearing long trousers,
I tremble at this ... but see? boy –
I began to take my hands away from you ...
Life sees you coming ... it cannot but hurt you ... but

Go forward, go forward, I hold the bandages and ointments ready,
And if you would go elsewhere and lie alone with your wounds, why
I shall not intrude upon you.
If you should fall into sin, innocent one,
that is the way of this pilgrimage.
But hate not God, nor turn from him in shame or self-reproach;
He has seen many such, His compassion is as great as His creation
Be tempted and fall and return,
Return and be tempted and fall
A thousand times and a thousand, even to a thousand thousand.
For out of this tribulation there comes a peace, deep in the soul, and surer than any dream ...
(altered and abbreviated)

Last week, we took the sacrament to a woman of almost 90 years, all of them, years of struggle. But strong of will she was, and of salty good faith. She was the sort of woman who had said to a hundred-thousand people along the way who needed her, "Here, take my hand." Now she was dying, and she knew it, but she was not afraid. Sitting up in bed, she took the bread and the wine with us, saying very distinctly, "It is the hand of God," and very soon, and very quietly she died, for she had a peace, deep in the soul, and surer than any dream. You see she had made a long journey. She was almost home. It was as though someone had come out from the gate to meet her, to walk the last mile with her. And He must have said to her, "Here, Hold my hand."

Let us pray

O Lord, don't let us be afraid to live and love and hold out our hands to life, while there is time – so that when the day grows dark, we may also lie us down in peace and say, "Father, into thy hands, into thy hands."

Amen