

Embodied Prayers: Hands

by Jill Hartwell Geoffrion

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. I Timothy 4:12-14

"I don't think I need to give you a charge, you already seem very charged up!" It was a humorous way to express the truth of the moment as my pastor began his words of advice to the ordinands, my husband and me, in 1984. Truly I was keenly feeling the excitement of the day. Still, the vows of ordination I was about to speak frightened me. If the words, "... God being my helper," had not preceded each "I will do so," I could never have agreed. Charged up, yes I was! But I yearned for new expressions of spiritual empowerment. The prayers which would be said on my behalf loomed large in my mind. I was counting on them to undergird my ministries and to help me be open to God in the ways that would be needed.

I walked to the front of the familiar sanctuary and kneeled. Awe gave way to shock as I realized that only those who had been ordained previously could place their hands on me in prayer. Hairy hands, their thick fingers and short fingernails protruding from suitcoats, came to rest on me. I had expected them on my head; I knew how much wisdom and knowledge I lacked! But they landed on my shoulders, on my back, as well as on my hair, ears and forehead. The words that were spoken to God in that ordination prayer comforted me, but how uncomfortable were the sensations of those hands. I knew they belonged to those who supported me and believed in me, but the descending pressure of them seemed so heavy.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 13:2-3

When had we started to use our hands to pray? I couldn't remember. Every once in a while when someone at the Tuesday morning women's Bible study was in tremendous pain or deep need we would stop our discussion and all focus audible prayers in her direction for as long as seemed appropriate. One day we gathered around a member who was sick, placing our hands on her as we talked with God about her situation. Since then, the ten of us had laid hands on each other many times. So it didn't seem at all out of place on a Spring morning in 1992 for someone to suggest, "Jill, why don't you kneel and we'll gather around to pray for you."

It was time for good-byes. I was formally concluding my pastoral ministry at the church in order to go back to school. My going-away present was to be a time of prayer bridging our shared experience and my future work in Christian Spiritualities and Women's Studies.

I can't remember the words that were spoken on my behalf although they moved me to tears. What I recall most clearly is how gently, yet firmly, the women laid their hands upon me. So much was expressed through their hands: love, faith, care, pain at separation, hope, and gratitude. My body assured me that their spiritual desires for me and my work were resting securely both in God's loving hands and within me.

How could the laying on of hands by those who had no special calling or training feel so much more empowering than the laying on of hands of the ordained? Just the thought of it seemed almost blasphemous. But it felt true in a deep and hallowed place.

...I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. II Timothy 1:5b-7

Recently I met with my doctoral committee. When the five hours of discussion were completed, the necessary forms signed, and the tape recorder

turned off, the scholars orchestrated a body-centered response. Gifting me in the most beautiful way I can imagine, one said, "We want to commission you to continue to do your work in the name of women everywhere and for the soul of the Church." They formed a circle around me placing their hands on my body. Each woman spoke such beautiful desires into those moments of spoken and sung prayer, but it's not the words that have stayed with me; it's their touch, full of expectation, nurture, faith, and accountability.

And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Matthew 6:7

The embodied certainty that God touches people has allowed me to be open to using my hands as I experience and express God's love in prayer. Having asked, "Are you comfortable holding hands as we pray?" I rest my cool palm in someone's warm hand as we bring our deep longings before God; the words we speak seem supported by the physical connection we're sharing. What deep love and hope wells up and flows over as I place my hand on my sons' heads as a silent blessing before they head off to first and third grade in the morning. I even find myself growing more accustomed to the warmth I often feel as my hands rest prayerfully on the body of a person in need and the exhilaration I experience after singing praises to God, when my hands tingle inviting and reminding me to extend God's love!

As a child I was taught to pray with my hands together. When I assume that familiar position I feel present to myself and close to God. I'm glad I've learned to pray with extended hands, too. As I reach out to God I also experience God moving through me connecting me in sacred ways with others.

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