

Sacred Ceremonies: Laying on of Hands

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Last week we talked about how some time is more full of time than other times, and last week that time more full of time than other times was the pivot days of the last day of the year full of yesteryear, and the first day of the year full of tomorrow. Another time full of time that we'll talk about today are those that we might call ceremonial times. Ceremonies collect up years, of experiences, maturation, training,¹ and mark a passage into new responsibilities. Past and future meet in them.

Time passes day to day, but it is punctuated by significant moments – birth and death are the biggest of them, with marriage in between, which creates a basket of human beings to hold birth to death and more marriages. We stage these events, and others, in such a way that we really do ponder their real significance. That's what a ceremony is and that's what ceremonies do. Some of these have such a depth or seriousness or beauty or intimacy that we sense God being involved, or that we know that in true meaning of them we need him to be. They are then *sacred* ceremonies.

Over the next few weeks we are going to look at some sacred ceremonies given to us by God. Today, since we are doing so, we will look at Ordination and the Laying on of Hands. God has a good message for us all in this ceremony. Let's pray.

¹ And community thought.

The ceremony itself was in October of 1988 in San Antonio, Texas, at First Presbyterian Church just four blocks north of the Alamo. Several people laid hands on my shoulders and head and neck ... and prayed. This was my ordination with the laying on of hands. It was the gathering up and sealing of many things. There were the years of graduate school, the five written exams, and the preaching to the five hundred people in Mission Presbytery that one day in Kerrville, TX. But then came that worshipping day when a group laid hands on me and prayed. With that I became an ordained a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ and obligated, not to my personal agenda, but that of Christ's.

In our text today I am tempted to say that Peter had it easier in simply coming up with, "You are the Christ" and getting the commissioning word; "On this recognition point and hope in me which you've just spoken and using people like you, I, Jesus, will build my church." No learning Greek and Hebrew. No supervisory committee meetings. No "swearing in" and going through a ritual of hands being laid on. Just a commissioning type word.

Nevertheless, this Peter-text gives us the heart of what the ceremony of ordination and the laying on of hands is all about: the message of Jesus Christ. Peter is, in terms of it, to find the lost and build the found. That's what it is all about. This is, after all, when we boil it all down, the one thing that will heal human lives and human communities and bring satisfaction and glory to Jesus Christ: people hearing about Jesus and connecting to Jesus the Christ.

Today we enact an ancient ritual of laying on of hands for our two elders (and in it everyone who is an elder gets their eldership renewed). At heart, again, is the Bible text: recognize Jesus Christ; build his church. His church.

Connect to Jesus. Connect others to Jesus. Heal the world.
Bring glory to Christ.

There is a lot of laying on of hands in the Bible. Isaac lays hands on Jacob for blessing. Moses lays hands on Joshua for succession. The priest lays hand on the scapegoat for sin bearing. The apostles lay hands on Stephen and six others for deacon ministry. They all mean slightly different things but in each the ceremony signifies *a setting apart*. It is never for status. It is always for service.

And it is a service called for by the Holy Spirit. And it's a service for which the Holy Spirit is needed. In the laying on of hands, this part about the Holy Spirit is to be seen.

In Isaiah we find that prophet hearing God say, "Whom shall I send?" Of course, God is, I think, looking right into his eyes and no place else. Isaiah replies, "Here I am, send me." His reply grammatically ends with a period but I often wonder if it sounded like, "Here I am, send me?" Me?

Anyone with the slightest bit of introspection would ask the same, "Me?" Me, with my fears, my limitations...I don't know all the Bible, I get tired, I whine. My prayer life needs help. Sometimes I'd rather sleep in than come to church. *Me* tasked with *God's* work? I don't have what it takes.

Now everyone gets told what Adam and Eve were told, to have dominion. Now everyone gets told what Abraham was told, to be a blessing to the nations. Now everyone gets told what Jesus' followers were told, to go and make disciples. All are sons and daughters of Adam and Eve and there is Jesus' priesthood of all believers. So, all of us can hear the Lord's "Whom shall I send?" And all of us can ask

in reply, “Me?” All of us might think, “I don’t have what it takes.”

Still, some are tasked with a specific work, like making their *local* church just what Jesus wants it to be. Whether with the general task or the more specific work, through the ages men and women have asked, “Me?” and they have always, in one way or the other, thought in their heads and hearts, “You, you ... Jeff, Wilma, Donna...” do not have *what* it takes.... and that’s true. But, you do have *who* it takes.

Remember the laying on of hands has to do with the Holy Spirit? That Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. He’s on you and in you via the Spirit. You don’t have what it takes, but you have who it takes.

Wilma, Donna, all elders, all in the priesthood of believers, you have Jesus. You have *his* Spirit. That’s what the hands laid on mean. You have his touching you to call you, and you have his touching you to impart his Spirit into you. The Jesus who told Peter about building the church is the Jesus who said, “As you go doing what I have commanded, I will be with you to the end of the age.”

Jesus came into a simple Mary, in a simple home, in a simple Bethlehem, as Emmanuel (“Now you have with you who it takes”). It is still simple. Here it is a simple laying on of plain hands. But it is always, you have with you who it takes.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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