
With Both Hands

Luke 10.38-41

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel at Baccalaureate, May 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I came to America three years ago determined to understand baseball. Perhaps the symbol of baseball – perhaps the symbol of the American summer now upon us – is the large padded mitt you wear on your non-throwing hand. You have to realize I'm a person who's spent a lot of time trying and failing to catch a cricket ball with *two* hands, so the one handed method makes me feel pretty small. That single baseball glove says to me "Of course I can catch and prepare to throw at the same time. We are, after all, a culture committed to multi-tasking."

We are indeed a culture committed to multi-tasking. It sometimes seems every aspect of life is being shaped so as to ensure it can be performed with one hand. We drive vehicles with automatic transmission so we always have one hand free to fight with the road map or speak on a cell phone. We eat fast food so we can have a hand free to browse the web while the other hand reaches for the French fries. We write a paper, go to a party, text message our way into a new romantic encounter, and follow the basketball score all in the same evening, or even all at the same moment. This is something we learn quite early on, at least in middle or high school, and we notice it in teenagers because they're doing several things at the same time but they haven't yet learned the art of seeming fully present in each one. (Of course not, we might say – you have to go to college for that.) But teenagers are really no different from the rest of us. It's as if life is a supermarket, and we have one hand on the cart while the other hand is always available to touch and sample the myriad experiences and opportunities available on one or other side of the aisle, tossing each consumer possibility into the cart with little or no thought to the checkout. Well, life-consumers that we all are, today is checkout day.

From time to time in a student existence something comes along that can't be addressed with just one hand. I wonder whether you've ever held a baby. It's pretty scary, because all your well-developed social skills go out the window. Especially if it's someone else's baby, this is not an exercise you want to get wrong. It really does take two hands. And if new life needs two hands, so does death. You don't want to be sitting by the bedside of a suffering loved one thumbing out a text message or scrolling your way through Facebook. And from time to time you realize that friendship needs two hands too. Thirteen months ago many of us here today were together in this very place trying to make sense of the death of your classmate Chris Sanders. It was a very difficult event to comprehend within what we might call a "one-hand culture". What made it more poignant and more agonizing is that those close to him really *had* held him in two hands. They really had. Those of us who walked away from his memorial service did so resolved all the more to hold one another in two hands.

I wonder what things make you interrupt the one-hand culture. What are the things you take with both hands? Maybe a ticket to the Duke-UNC basketball game. Maybe a top job offer or a place at your number one graduate school. As you look back at your time at Duke, I wonder which have been the moments that needed two hands. To put the question another way, I wonder which are the places where you're content just to be silent – with no iPod, no conversation, and no jogging or snacking – just beauty or peace. And I wonder who are the people you are content to be silent with – not have great laughs, or great debates, or great dancing, but just company and stillness and companionship. Those are the places and the people with whom we can be still, through whom we can know what matters most, for whom we think it's worth using both hands.

1600 years ago St Augustine of Hippo distinguished between two kinds of things. One kind of thing we *enjoy*. These are the things that are worth having for their own sake. They aren't a means to an end: they're a joy in themselves. They're things that never run out. You don't have to make an argument for why they matter: they speak for themselves. The other kind of thing we *use*. Things we use aren't good for themselves – they're a means to some further end. They do run out. They serve only a limited purpose.

I want to suggest to you that what we grasp or take or juggle in *one* hand is what we *use*, and what we yearn for and treasure and shape our whole posture to receive and cherish is what we *enjoy*. What we *use* only requires

one hand: we can use a number of things at the same time. But to *enjoy* something, or someone, we really need *both* hands, because it takes all our concentration.

Now a central insight of the Christian faith, and this is an insight I believe shared with Jews and Muslims and perhaps others as well, is that the distinction between use and enjoy applies to God too. God doesn't *use* us. God *enjoys* us. In other words we're not a consumer good God tosses into the cart and thinks about dealing with later at the checkout. On the contrary, the whole life of God is shaped to be in relationship with us, to enjoy us. God never deals with us with one hand. God always approaches us with both hands – because we mean everything to God. There's nothing more important in God's life than us – there's no reason to multi-task, for God's joy is *us*. The great mystery, of course, is the mystery of whether we will enjoy God in return, and shape our life in order to receive God with two hands, or simply try to use God as just one more consumer good in the shopping cart. One Reformation description of the Christian faith says that we were made to *enjoy God for ever*. That doesn't sound like a one-hander to me, however big the glove on that one hand. That's a project that needs both hands. In the story of Mary and Martha, we see Martha, who wants to take God with one hand while doing everything else at the same time, contrasted with Mary, who realizes that God truly is a project that needs both hands.

There's a story about the Irish humorist Oscar Wilde. He was at a party and the hostess came up to him and said, "Mr Wilde, are you enjoying yourself?" He replied, "Madam, there's so little else here to enjoy."

I want to say a little more about what it means to enjoy. Think about the moment you're on your computer in the library, and you've been on blackboard and read the assigned text for class. It's late in the evening, and you feel like heading out to find some friends to play with, or maybe even doing the radical thing and having an early night. But something tells you you've read something that night that really matters in a way your other assignments haven't seemed to matter. That something makes you look up the book that the blackboard text came from and take it from the shelf and curl up with it in a large chair and hold it with two hands. That's what it means to step from using to enjoying. Education you *use* gets into your head. Education you *enjoy* gets into your heart and soul.

And it's the same with friends. You've met a lot of people here. Some are challenging, some are troubled, some are serious, some are fun. But one or two are different. You can't end calls to them by just saying "Might catch you later" while you see if you have more lively plans for the evening. They want *you*, not just your odd five minutes here and there. And you're a bit scared, because you know if you really allow them to know you, you're going to be changed. They say to you, "Don't use me to idle away your free time or mask your loneliness. Either be fully present to me, receive all that I am, *enjoy* me, or don't bother at all." That kind of a person needs two hands. And if you're committed to one-handed life, you never get to enjoy a friend like that.

Living life with both hands takes time – because what you receive with both hands takes longer to assimilate than what you grab with one. Above all living with two hands takes gentleness – because treasuring moments, people or places with both hands, rather than grabbing them with one, means cherishing them, tenderly noticing their details, carefully attending to their difference from you but rejoicing in your presence with them.

I don't know if any of you have ever seen an ibex. An ibex is a large and very rare mountain goat, about 5 feet tall. The male has enormous ridged horns that curve all the way round to his back. I once climbed a mountain up to 12,000 feet and suddenly caught sight of an ibex 300 feet away. I gently stepped closer and closer. This wasn't a moment I could grab with a quick camera shot and move on. If I was going to see the ibex close up, even though I'd already been walking six hours, I had to change my plans for the day. Softly and slowly I went closer and closer, one careful step at a time. I saw its proud chin, its huge curving horns stretching back behind its head. Finally I was 20 feet away from this prince of the mountains. And how I *enjoyed* that moment. I don't know how long I was there. But I felt so privileged and moved and deeply deeply alive. And it took more than two hands. It took everything in me. *That's* what it means to enjoy.

And that brings me to the question I want to ask each one of you on this, your last weekend at Duke; and it's a question you can only answer for yourself. No one can answer it for you. The question is this. Have your four years at Duke taught you how to enjoy and what to enjoy? Or have they simply taught you how and what to *use*

in a more sophisticated way? A Duke degree opens doors and smoothes introductions. It makes an even wider aisle of goods to graze past and put in your consumer cart and gives you a whole range more of things to use. Everyone knows that. But if your Duke education has really mattered, it's because you've allowed it to really *change* you, at the core of your being. You can look back on moments, people, books, classes, professors, places, and say, "Those were the times when I really learned to enjoy".

Then, my friends, you'll know you've had an education. Now, it's time to depart, to commence the rest of your life. And my prayer and commission to you is just one word. Enjoy.