

## In The Grip of Love

Holding hands for the dinner blessing is an old family tradition on my side, the kind of thing we do because we did—like putting both socks on before either shoe or refrigerating peanut butter. At suppertime in my household, we serve up a large helping of chaos, with odd comings and goings and menus a la carte. But most evenings, at some moment with nearly everyone present, we clasp hands in a circle and say grace.

There are problems inherent to hands-holding at the dinner table. The first one concerns reach—the ratio of arm to table length. Little limbs don't stretch that far. This means that table blessings at our home resemble a game of Twister. Some people sing for their supper; my kids impersonate a contortionist.

There is a long tradition of pain associated with religious fervor. Monks have worn hair shirts, slept on slabs of concrete and flagellated to the point of blood loss. John the Baptist ate locusts in the desert—not the chocolate-covered kind, mind you. Some mystics have barely eaten at all. And for the truly fanatical, there have always been the *stigmata*, the wounds of Christ, self-inflicted as evidence of severe devotion. But such displays seem to me a lamentable waste of energy in a world already overtaxed by needless pain and suffering.

If our children endure any trauma from stretching during the dinner prayer, it doesn't appear to be life threatening. None of them to our knowledge has ever filed a complaint with Child Protection Services over this ritual. But I couldn't count on both

hands the number of times milk spilled or sleeves got dipped in mashed potatoes or applesauce because of arms spanning the distance. In fact, it is from food brushed together on plates during the blessing that our children have discovered some of their favorite culinary combinations—sliced peaches on pepperoni pizza, crushed potato chips over broccoli and cheese, grapes in peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I’m guessing Goobers and Reese’s got their start this same way.

The other problem with hands-holding lies with the hands themselves. By the time we get around to the blessing, one or more of our kids likely have already fondled a greasy chicken leg or snatched a slice of buttery garlic bread on the sly. They probably have hands fit for lava soap. Joining hands can quickly devolve into linking pinkies.

The connection between hygiene and holiness is ancient. Cleanliness is next to godliness, they say. The ancient Hebrews followed an elaborate dietary code to defend against impurity. When Jesus’s disciples ate without washing their hands, the Scribes and Pharisees objected not for fear of germs but out of a concern for their spiritual well-being. In Judaism, the sacredness of the physical was understood. Yet Jesus looked to another, competing expression of holiness: the intention of the human heart. “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,” he said, “but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”<sup>1</sup>

While I don’t relish grubby little hands greasing my palms, I clasp them gladly anyway for the sake of something greater than purity; while I bristle at the thought of little wrists and elbows popping out of joint from the strain of stretching, I grasp them firmly

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:11

nonetheless in gratitude for a connection no force on earth could sever. I'm speaking of the intimate bond of love.

This is why we hold hands at the dinner table—because the sweetest bread is the bread of belonging, and every evening around suppertime I'm ready to taste it again. It may be quite a hurdle for our eldest daughter to clasp hands with her little brother while obsessing about where his have been over the last five minutes. It may stretch credulity itself for siblings to join hands and pray with the people they've just wished under their breath they were not really related to. But this is all part of its charm! We don't hold hands at dinner because we always feel like it, or because sweater sleeves look good with dried tomato paste. We do it because we know we are held in the grip of Love itself. When you look at it this way, it seems amazing that anyone would want to pray at all without a gummy hand to hold on either side.

Still, I might wash mine when it's all over...