

Her hands

By [Mihee Kim-Kort](#)

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She was looking at her fingers.

I was zeroed in on my laptop with my own fingers flying over the keys typing an e-mail when I glanced over at my mom sitting next to me on the couch. Her hands. She stretched her fingers out turning them over and back again and again periodically wincing at both the pain and sight. She looked at me and said softly in Korean, *“They look strange, don’t they?”*

Mild arthritis has started to bend her fingers with joints and knuckles swollen and angled in unnatural ways. And looking at them I felt my heart soften towards her. A rare moment.

When she’s been with us for any amount of time long enough for us to fall into familiar family dynamics and roles, I’m impatient and easily frustrated with her. The nagging. The questions. The over-reactions. The way she is seemingly ubiquitous and always in the way of the fridge, bathroom, or my favorite spot on the couch. I can tell my husband is embarrassed by my sudden reversion back to obnoxious adolescence.

She’s been with us now for the last two weeks because of the early arrival of baby no. 3 by unplanned C-section. Remembering the difficult recovery—particularly those first few weeks—with our twins two years ago she insisted on coming down early. And I couldn’t say no, in fact, I would be stupid to be less than eager to have her help. She’s still relatively young at 58, and has the energy of a spring chicken the way she frantically races around the house attempting too many chores at once. But once she arrives and the days go by I start to get annoyed. I can’t help it.

Tonight, though, as I look at her fingers I think about all that those hands have done not only these last two weeks but my and her entire life. When she was young her family ran a hotel in Seoul, and she cleaned and helped maintain it. When we immigrated to the U.S. she joined a group of the ladies from the church and sought employment at an electronic manufacturing company soldering tiny little wires and

bits together on an assembly line. And then it was work at a dry cleaner's. And then more cleaning gigs. And the ministry of the deacons at the church. And eventually becoming a pastor's wife—probably one of the hardest, most high-pressure jobs for a Korean woman. Hours of painstaking work cleaning and cooking and then rubbing my feet after they swelled up like doughy pillows with the twins' arrival. All that work both small and big done by those hands over the past many decades.

So I look at her hands again, crooked in almost impossible ways, and I think that they are actually the most beautiful fingers I've ever laid eyes on. I remember what she once told me—that **everyone has some struggle, and everyone needs and deserves some tenderness.** Of course, it's ironic that I would not recall this sage advice in my interactions with her, but seeing her worn hands, and the way they softly rub baby no. 3's back, I am actually leveled—surprisingly, not by guilt as I maybe would expect—but by gratitude and compassion. I am who I am because of her hands.

Her hands.

It conjures up the first time I served communion to the mother of an older woman, "Barbara," in my congregation. Barbara had invited both me and the senior pastor over to her home to break bread one last time as her mother's health was declining, and she was clearly not long for this world. I watched her take a piece of bread in one hand after the words of institution, and bend her head near her mother's ear saying, "Mom, Mom. Here's the bread." Barbara put it on her mother's slightly outstretched tongue. And then with the small plastic cup, "Mom, Mom. Here's the juice." And she stuck her pinky in there a few times and dabbed her mother's tongue with it. And watching it, I lost all sense of professionalism and wept quietly. My mind flashed forward to the future, and what it would be like to do this with my mother, to care for her in this way, a tiny glimmering of the way she sacrificed her own flesh and blood for me over and over, an ordinary, but exquisite, and oh-so-undeniably true image of this holy sacrament.

I'm still always surprised how much marriage, and then especially parenthood has made me see these truths a little more clearly. I never expected these seasons to really have such a huge impact on shaping my outside relationships. The dynamics between parents and children run such a wide spectrum, and I am totally aware that I am one of the fortunate ones with a decent, if not really comfortable, relationship with my folks, especially by Korean standards. But, I admit, that I don't act like I

know it. I'm more inclined to be indignant—actually, full of road-rage and unnecessary curses—towards daily little impositions, those interruptions, and those who I feel like have wronged me or simply got under my skin. But, after the birth of no. 3—the incredible and lovely gift of this one—and then watching my mom handle me with care, and care for *my* children—I'm feeling more convicted by how important it is to enter into every moment with that same tenderness shown to me by my mother, that same gratitude and compassion.

Everyone has some struggle, and everyone needs some grace. And those who may need it the most are possibly the ones that are the nearest. This kingdom-compassion isn't only for the strangers but so for the ones who are invisible and taken for granted in other ways. *God, help me to see and feel this and to love better.*

Originally posted at [Kim-Kort's blog](#)