

September 8, 2019 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

[In #10, basic quote from Sermon Brainwave for this date. In #7 Star Tribune travel section 9-1-19, page G6 by Diana Lambdin Meyer "Suffragette cities of the Midwest". In #6 quote from Greta Thunberg from here: <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/08/30/greta-thunberg-climate-change-justice-youth-strike>]

God's Work, Our Hands

Grace and peace, beloved, hear again the promise from Psalm 1: You are like trees, planted by streams of water. You are rooted, deeply rooted.

On this first Sunday of the program year,

As everyone connected to education—little ones and big ones, colleges profs and 2nd grade teachers, administrators, support people, parents—as everyone takes a big deep breath,
As hurricanes churn and fires burn,
As healing happens and our hearts are full... of hope, and often their share of fear,
As we grapple with what it means to be faithful, to be Jesus-followers in this complex time,
Today we hear again that we are like trees, planted by streams of water.

Our interweaving roots go deep and wide, our fruit is rich and plentiful.

You are rooted, deeply rooted.

With congregations across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American, the ELCA,

today we partake in a Sunday called God's work, our hands.

For that's the truth: it's all God's work, and it's our hands, indeed, our bodies, our hearts, our minds, that God uses to do God's work.

(Today in Deuteronomy we hear that choice between life and death.)

We hear the Psalm, you are like trees planted by water.

We hear Paul's letter to Philemon (Phi Le mon) about slavery.

And finally we hear Jesus challenging call to be disciple, to carry the cross, to follow.

With these passages in our ears, and plenty of news and church events and conversations in my heart, here's a **God's Work, Our Hands Top 10 List**, a la David Letterman.

With deep roots, we are like trees planted by streams of water, and our fruits are many.

10. God's work, our tensions.

Did you notice, today we heard the entire book of Philemon (Phi Le mon), all 21 verses of it?

In prison, Paul has gotten to know a fellow named Onesimus, who has been Philemon's slave.

There's a palpable tension in this letter: Paul says to Philemon essentially,

"You can't call Onesimus both your brother and your slave, something has to give."

Here we get this "glimpse into Paul working out the implications of the gospel, the systems, the structures."

At the end of August we marked 400 years since slaves were first brought to this land.

This passage was used by both sides in the Civil War, and we're still grappling with these tensions.

And that brings me to number 9. God's work, our hands.

At the end of the month we will be hosting for a week 3 or 4 families who are experiencing homelessness.

This is a program called Families Moving Forward, week by week families stay with congregations.

Over the years, many of you have volunteered.

Maybe you prepared a meal or played games with kids, did laundry or took an overnight shift.

It's time to sign up, but before that, next Sunday, after worship, we'll take time to reflect on the experience of hosting—not so much the what do I do? but how does it feel?

Where do our interactions with these families feel real and life-giving?

And, where is there cross cultural tension? More to learn?

Economics, power, race, the personalities of introverts and extroverts, parenting styles, these are all in play.

So often we get caught because we know cross cultural tension, but we don't know what to do with it.

As we prepare to use our hands, next Sunday let's reflect together, let's go deeper.

8. God's work, our money.

Today's gospel ends with the line about giving up all our possessions.

One of my colleagues recently posted a question on social media to a group of church members, "How does your household think about what you give away?"

Crickets-silence.

Finally one person responded that they were still thinking about the question.

Then someone else said, maybe the point is: we don't think about, we don't think about what we will give.

I'll probably tell you this story again in the coming weeks, for it's so vital.

Jesus has a lot to say about possessions, about money, about giving, about discipleship.

I pray that in these next months we will normalize these conversations, for our decisions about money are always decisions of faith.

7. God's work, our voices.

Last week I read an article about the women's suffrage movement.

It began, “They were all considered respectable, upstanding women in their community.

School teachers and church leaders and charitable volunteers, each one educated and God-fearing.” They met at the First Presbyterian Church in Hastings and together they quietly strategized how they’d organize in Minnesota to ratify the 19th Amendment, the amendment that gave women the right to vote. In the summer of 1920, this amendment became the law of the land, but in those months prior, the states were doing their work of ratification.

It was 100 years ago today, September 8, 1919 that Minnesota ratified the 19th Amendment?

God’s work, our voices.

6. God’s work, our planet, our future.

Around the world, it’s young people who have led the way on climate action.

Friday, September 20th is being called a Climate Strike.

Young people have invited all of us to come together for our planet.

It’ll look different in different places, but in the Twin Cities this will be a midday march to the capital.

Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg says, “The most important thing you can do now as an individual is to try to read all these things that no one wants to read.”

And she goes on, “And I know that is very boring, and that is why this information needs to become more available and then put pressure on the people in power.”

And that brings me to 5. God’s work, our decisions.

As a congregation we’re asking: should we put solar panels on our roof, or our roofs plural, to decrease our carbon footprint and to live out our values?

Today after worship, there is a third opportunity to gather for discussion about solar.

This will focus on the process and the financing—how this could work.

Because the tax credit timing is tight, this decision likely will be made before the end of the year.

It’s time to dig deep, to read, to talk, to be part of this discernment, and to put pressure on our systems and structures to work for our planet.

4. God’s work, our relationships.

Hate—that’s such a strong word.

Today’s gospel often trips us up with talk of hating family, even life itself.

It’s confusing, it’s painful.

It feels like we’re being asked to choose between the call to follow Jesus and the call to be family.

So it touches us where we may be tender already.

I wonder though, if this isn't so much prescribing that we must hate family, but rather describing a gospel that won't settle.

It's asking us to look at everything, even our relationships, even our relationships with those most dear to us, and to make following our way.

3. God's work, our lives.

If you know the writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, today's Gospel sounds familiar.

It was during Hitler's rise in the 1930s that the German churches were grappling with how to respond—acquiesce to the rhetoric, the hatred, or together stand up for another way.

In forming the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer helped shape this other way, this way of costly grace, precious grace, grace that demands everything, sometimes even one's life itself.

2. God's work, our brains, our hearts, our bodies.

Dear friends in Christ, it's that time.

Today's gospel makes me squirm because it's real, so real.

When I look around,

when I listen to the rhetoric in our nation,

when hear the calls of young people who can see the future, their future,

when I listen, really listen, to the experiences of my black and brown-bodied friends, it's real.

We could keep on, we could let the status quo lull us, even as our anger rises.

But something bigger is happening and something greater is being asked of us.

Pick up your cross, beloved, and follow, let grace guide you, and follow.

Finally, 1. God's work, God's grace.

We don't do this on our own, but rather in community.

We don't do this overnight, but day by day, week by week, year by year.

We don't do this by our sheer will, but with God's grace, the Spirit's power, Jesus' way.

As we begin this new year, may we be rooted deeply, planted by the water and ready to do God's work with our hands, our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our very lives, for that is the call.

You are rooted, deeply rooted. Amen.