

September 13, 2020 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel and Nicholas Tangen, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Romans 14:1-12, Psalm 103
Matthew 18:21-35

Grace, peace, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen

Today we call “God’s Work, Our Hands Sunday”.

Across our wider church, the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, congregations are thinking about how God’s work is done by our hands.

In smaller towns and in urban areas,

on the prairies and in the mountains,

in places plagued by COVID, or deeply touched by racial tension,

or reeling from wildfires or hurricanes or winds,

and in places where these struggles seem far off,

it’s *God’s Work, Our Hands* that God’s people embody today.

Really, it’s *God’s work, our hands* that we embody every day.

How many times are we to forgive, Peter asks in today’s gospel.

Should we forgive just once? Or maybe seven times?

No, Jesus says, seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven.

I get caught in these passages between the details, the numbers, the math,

and the point: it’s incalculable, it’s excessive,

it’s more than we deserve, more than we can repay, more than we’d give to others,

and usually more than we’d give to ourselves, so judgemental we can be.

...Such is the grace of God.

We could talk about forgiveness this morning, about our God whose steadfast love abounds,

our God whose mercy is everlasting,

whose gracious ways shape us,

who forgives us and calls us to forgive one another.

All that is true, it’s real, it’s palpable.

But today, most of all, I pray that you’ll experience again your own hands,

your own body,

your own voice,

your own mind,

your very selves

as the tools, the implements, God uses...for the common good, for justice love,
for living out this abundant forgiveness and grace that transforms the world.

It's because of this grace that our hands and minds are busy,
our tongues are tuned,
our love is big, bigger than ourselves...it's because of this grace.

This morning we're thinking especially of food insecurity.

Nick, we're hearing a lot about food insecurity and some of us are experiencing it.
Can you share more?

Nick: With the continued onslaught of the pandemic and the economic downturn, the hunger crisis in MN continues to deepen. In fact, the Star Tribune reported that the number of food insecure Minnesotans in 2020 will exceed the number of individuals during the 2008 economic crisis, hitting over 730K people. So many folks in the state have lost jobs and income, and the end of the additional unemployment aid triggered a real boom in people's food needs. This is hitting populations at every demographic and economic level. College Students in our neighborhood, a population that is already prone to food insecurity will see the rates rise. The housing crisis has increased the number of unsheltered neighbors who struggle to find even marginal amounts of food each day, and if the Governor's eviction ban ends that number could increase dramatically. And even large non-profits like The Sheridan Story, who we support, are struggling to raise enough money to pay for the needed 100,000 meals for kids. There is a real crisis on our hands.

For a number of years we've joined some of our neighboring congregations in supporting The Sheridan Story. In typical times, we raise the funds for The Sheridan Story when you give coins to the kids who are collecting at the doorway at the end of the service.

In typical times, we team up with these other local congregations taking a turn on Fridays at Marcy Open School to stock backpacks so that families who are feeling that food insecurity will have more supplies for the weekend ahead.

But the times aren't typical and the need now is so much greater.

Let's watch a piece about how The Sheridan Story is operating in these times...

THE SHERIDAN STORY VIDEO

In the Spirit of God's Work, Our Hands, today we have the opportunity to support The Sheridan Story.

We can do this online via our website.

We can also drop off real-live coins at church.

We'll tell you the details of these collections during the announcements.

And coins aren't all we're collecting this week.

We are also collecting food and hygiene items to distribute to our neighbors without shelter. Many of our neighbors don't have access to a kitchen or even basic cooking elements, so it's important to gather food items that can be eaten without a lot of preparation and on the go. Items like granola bars, protein bars, fruit cups, beef jerky, and dried fruit. We are also looking for things like hand soap and sanitizer, deodorant, baby wipes, and other hygiene items. Consider dropping items off this week or next and we'll be sure to get them into the hands that need them.

Sometimes I read the newspaper with the perspective of God's Work, Our Hands.

It's moving. Try it, it adds a layers to the daily news.

The Inspired section back on the 29th had some great profiles of the scientists, the researchers, and the medical professionals working to control COVID and to care for life.

There were epidemiologists and infectious disease people, professors and plasma donors.

God's Work, Our Hands.

And then there was an entire page of Thank Yous, hundreds of lines of thank yous,

to those researchers,

to front line workers, and truckers and those who keep the shelves stocked,

to government leaders and first responders,

to lab techs and ICU nurses and doctors,

to teachers.

One read: "I want to thank the mental health professionals who are on the emotional, often unseen, front lines of this virus."

Dear friends, it's God's work, and it's our hands.

I say that, and there's this pressure that we may be feeling - I feel it sometimes, maybe you do too.

God's Work, Our Hands could feel like law: like we're supposed to work our hands harder so that this incredibly broken world will be healed.

That's a heavy burden:

these systemic issues are so, so massive.

...As though we need to be at every protest,

read every anti-racism book,

give even more money.

Do you know that pressure?

That brings us back to the servant in today's gospel.

This isn't about what we do, it's about what God does, how God sets us free to be God's hands.

I think this tendency to trust first and foremost in our own work and our own abilities often gets in the way of our ability to truly serve our neighbor. When we focus only on the work of our hands, we tend to project unjust and unfair expectations on the neighbors we seek to serve. But Christ hasn't asked us to first get right to receive the lavish and excessive love of God. In our Baptism God showers us with grace on grace on grace, not because our hands have already done the work, but because Christ has.

Remember also that Christ took on the flesh not of the socially and politically upstanding, but the flesh of someone we most assuredly don't want to be. The prisoner, the death row inmate, the homeless, the impoverished, the one who balked at social norms. But so often it is these very people in our world who we refuse to serve or completely ignore or set up unjust expectations as preconditions for our service. But we know that in our Baptism, Christ claimed us not as the perfect or the good, but with all our baseness and failures and imperfections. We've been set free from the idea that we have to get right first, which means we are free to serve our neighbor as they are, now, imperfections and all. That's what it means to remember our baptism, to live and die to the Lord.

That line from Romans runs deep, If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord.

So then whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

Zach, can you lead us in singing?

SING: If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So then whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

To close, this morning we take time to remember Bob Hoisington who died in mid August.

He was 92 years old.

A memorial service for Bob was held yesterday.

From his childhood on, often running the five miles to his school in a nearby Pine Island, Bob was an athlete. He went to Macalester and the U of M, served in the military, and began teaching:

first in Windom where he and Jean fell in love,

then later at Minneapolis Central High School and Minneapolis Southwest High School.

Through all those year Bob taught math and coached cross country and track.

Around church Bob was an usher, a person of deep faith and generous, buoyant hospitality.

Bob and Jean had a big family including 4 children, 21 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

When members of this congregation die, we remember how the same waters that first washed over them in baptism, hold them now in death.

In his death, like in his life, Bob is held by God.

We pray at the baptismal waters, linking ourselves to God's powerful waters of promise.

Let us pray...Holy God, holy and powerful, we remember before you today our brother Bob. We thank you for giving him to us to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth. At the waters of baptism, you welcomed him into your love. At the waters, you comforted him in times of trouble and encouraged him in delight. At the waters, you now enfold him into Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Console us who mourn and bring us together to feast with all the saints of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.