

"The Tasks at Hand"

Isaiah 49:8-16a; John 21:15-19

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

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A working person must have tools, or else the tasks can't be done. Imagine a plumber without a wrench or a gardener without clippers; a doctor without a stethoscope or an accountant without a calculator. Tools of the trade are essential to getting the work done.

If we stop to think about it, we understand that all Christians are really bi-vocational. Beyond whatever other work we engage in, we also serve God each day. That's our **other** job and it's no less important than our occupation.

When we go to the office or to the store or stay at home to begin our labors, we all have a tool or set of tools that we use. As I think about my own work four common things come to mind immediately: my appointment book, a pen, the computer, and a Bible. It isn't long, however, when I will need to access other tools as well: the telephone, commentaries and study books, my hanging files, and keys.

Even my coffee cup can be a tool of sorts because it delivers what I seem to need to get started and to keep going. So we all have our essentials in whatever we do. Your needs probably won't be exactly the same as mine, but they will make up a somewhat similar list.

Now then, what are the tools of our Christian vocation? Ultimately they may be as varied as we are, but I would suggest this particular kit generally starts out with the same one for each of us. That tool you have with you now and you might not even consider it as such. That tool is your hands. There is no more basic means for service than that provided for you at the ends of your arms.

In a Lenten study I led at my prior church we used a book entitled *Yours Are the Hands of Christ*. In it the author points out that the humble hand is most often the means through which | we offer our devotion and thanks back to God.

Take a moment and look down in your lap for a moment. Hands are really rather odd things when you think about it. Skin over bones, ending with ten flexible digits. Even our nails are not there by chance, for they make fine activities possible. Try starting a roll of tape without using your fingernails, and you'll see what I mean. Every part of our hand structure is there for a purpose, even the thumb which provides counter pressure for our grasping.

The hands of no two people are identical. They may be very close in appearance but, as the infinite varieties of fingerprints will attest, our hands are our own and unique just to us. On some hands the fingers are short and stubby, while others have those which are long and delicate. Somehow, though, they all seem to get the job done regardless of their appearance.

In that study book we used there were chapter headings which lifted up the many roles that hands can play in our faith. Starting out with "praying" hands, the author turns to teaching hands, touching hands, healing hands, feeding hands, and serving hands.

His concluding chapter is appropriately called, "Joining Hands," reminding us that service is not only done individually, but often must be connected with others to have an impact. No one person, for example, is resourceful enough to make a significant difference on the problem of homelessness in a community. Together, though, good things can happen. And that goes for a thousand other areas of concern as well. Collectively, we can accomplish a great deal where individual effort is not enough. The Smoky Row Food Pantry is the first thing which comes to my mind.

Our Gospel reading for today is a reminder of Jesus' challenge to us **if** we want to follow him. He told his disciples they had witnessed God working through his life; now they would be empowered to carry on this saving work through **their** lives. That charge did not stop with those who had been close to him in his earthly lifetime, but rather extended down through the ages to us as well.

Teresa of Avila, living in 16th century Spain, expressed it in this simple way: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ is to look out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

The author of our study book reminded us further that Jesus served others because he loved others." He observe, "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by, 'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was homeless and you took me in.'"

Let me share a story from another author, the journalist Charles Kuralt, who worked at CBS News for thirty years. Kuralt is most remembered for his human-interest stories about common people that he met all across the United States. Some of the best are included in the book *A Life on the Road*, but perhaps none more appealing than this one. Take a listen:

In Westerville, Ohio, Professor John Franklin Smith taught speech and dramatics at Otterbein College until he reached the mandatory retirement age of seventy.

"I loved my students," [Smith] said, "and I think they loved me."

He couldn't imagine leaving the students behind. So when he was forced to retire [from the faculty], he just kept working at the college. He has worked on for fifteen [more] years—as a janitor in the gym.

"During my years as a professor," he said, "I'd walk through here and see the man cleaning the floor. I knew what a mop was and a bucket was. It was hard work at first, but I got on to it. It is necessary work and I try to do it well."

I asked him which was more rewarding, being a professor or a janitor.

This eighty-five year old man smiled and said, "Now don't put me on the spot like that. I think I'd have to say every age in life has its own compensation... Why, life is a joy!"

I went to Otterbein and knew Prof. Smith as a student and can attest to what Charles Kuralt wrote years ago. John Smith is gone now, as is Kuralt himself, but their imprint on life lives on. Professor Smith was a good man, a quiet inspiration to all those who knew him. He attested in a most unique way to the worth of every job on the college campus. John Smith jumped into life with both feet and he wasn't afraid to use his hands as well. Service to others could take many different forms, but it seem that all had their place...even the most humble.

Jesus said to Peter, "[If you love me] Take care of my sheep." The sheep which he refers to are, of course, the people. He had high expectations of Peter because this disciple was fully capable; likewise, I believe Jesus has high expectations of us. We are called by him to carry on the work that he started...direct efforts with real people.

We are his workers. We are his helpers. We are the bearers of the good news of God's love. We can take the ugly and make it beautiful. We can lift up the brokenhearted and help to make them whole. We can share from the earth's bounty so that all may benefit.

We can speak against injustice and promote equality. We can decry selfishness and show that there is a better way. We can point out the ravages humans have done to nature and respond with strategies for prevention. We can witness against war and aggression as a way of resolving differences.

We can see the better way, and live the better way, because the better way has been shown to us. The one who, as Isaiah puts it, has our name written "on the palms of my hands" does not leave us without resources. God has sent us a Savior to provide a means by which we might have a glimpse of the Divine | brought down within humanity's vision.

Yours are the hands of Christ. Mine are the hands of Christ. I don't know what this understanding raises for you, but it begs the question for me, "Now, what are you going to do?"

If—as a follower and disciple—Jesus chooses to work through us, I would say then it's time to get our hands out of our pockets and to **use** these effective "tools" in the building of his Kingdom. There are important tasks he has in mind just for you and me. You see his hands are now our hands. Think of it... what extraordinary trust he puts in us, and all I can figure is that he knows what we are capable of. We can do it. We can, that is, relying upon his help as we witness to his intentions for life.