

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

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Evangelism Sunday

September 27, 2009

HANDS AND FEET

James 1:19-27 Luke 4:16-21

Let's take a moment and ponder the gift of our hands and feet. Look at your hands, wiggle your fingers. Look at your feet, wiggle your toes, your ankles. Now sit on your hands and tuck your feet under your chair. Look around at your neighbors. Now cross your arms across your chest and cross your legs tucking away both your hands and feet. Look around at your neighbors. What you see are passive body postures, postures that say loud and clear I am not interested, I don't want to get involved, don't ask me to do anything. Now clap your hands together for a count of three... stomp your feet for a count of three... Now wave your hands high above your head, tap your feet, and if you can do three things at once, move your arms from side to side as well... From where I'm standing – what a beautiful sight! It is symbolic of a congregation that still has a pulse, that has the heart to be active not passive.

For several Sundays now we've closed our worship with song, singing "Sent out in Jesus' name... our hands are ready now... to change a world of hurt and pain into a world of love... The task is ours to do." Then with that song fresh in our hearts and minds I have been sending you forth into world with the inspiring words of Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body here on earth but yours; no feet but yours... yours are the (hands and the) feet by which he goes about doing good." Yes, we are the hands and feet of Christ. We have a task to do. We are to be about doing good. In the words of James, we are called not to be merely hearers of God's word but doers of the word – doers who act. Truth faith is active in works of love. As James says later, "Faith without works is dead" or another way to say that is – faith without loving action is no faith at all.

For James and his church the problem was not hearing the Word but doing the Word. They knew all about Jesus. They had given their intellectual assent to his message but were struggling to put their faith into action. It's a struggle that we all have as individuals and as a church. Upon hearing Scripture, for example, we tend to ask, "What's the author trying to say? What's really going on? What did Jesus mean by that?" But Scripture doesn't just want to be understood, it longs to be put into action. Our tendency is to step back, to ponder, to think, to consider, to reflect when God's word and Jesus the Word long for us to get moving, to get into the act, to perform the text rather than just speak it or hear it. (Inspired by Edward F. Markquart)

Again, James says, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” It is reminiscent of what Jesus once said, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell – and great was its fall!” (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus does not call us just to be a listener who listens nor just a thinker who thinks nor just a talker who talks nor just a believer who believes nor just a prayer who prays. (Inspired by Edward F. Markquart) Jesus who is a doer himself, as evident in his mission statement from Luke’s gospel this morning, calls us to get things done. He blesses our hands and our feet in order to change a world of hurt and pain into a world of love.

Now what exactly does Jesus want us to do as a congregation and what partnerships can we form with other congregations to do even more? That’s what we’ve been discerning through our Knox Conversations and through our involvement with the North Bay Sponsoring Committee. With several conversations under our belts we’ve come to a critical part of the process – actually considering here at Knox three possible actions: a community garden, outreach to our neighborhood starting with the apartment complex, and what I am calling “Hands and Feet” projects starting with VOICES. It’s not that we as a congregation haven’t been doing things to change a world of hurt and pain into a world of love, it’s about discerning where God is calling us to build upon what we have done, to keep being believers who act. So your presence and participation in the Knox Conversation on Tuesday evening this week is vital because we are actually at the stage of deciding to do something.

Now a little more about what I am calling “Hands and Feet” projects. This happens to be the Sunday designated as Evangelism Sunday by our denomination and this year’s emphasis is on Servanthood Evangelism. Many churches across the nation have taken up the denomination’s challenge to move into their communities, to move into their neighborhoods with good news in acts of love and many are doing it on Sunday morning. It happens like this.

The congregation gathers for worship at the usual hour - a joyful noise is made with a few songs, some scripture is read, and then the expected sermon time comes earlier in the hour. The preacher begins to preach but it is just a few introductory comments because the preacher then sends the congregation out of the sanctuary and into the community, to be “doers” of all that is proclaimed in church each Sunday.

Members of these churches are saying things like, “Every week, we hear the sermon. This week, we lived it.” Or “That was the best sermon I ever remember hearing because I didn’t actually hear it but I did it.” It is reminiscent of what Saint Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” What these congregations are learning anew is that actions do indeed speak louder than words because it’s about being the hands and feet of Christ, it’s about embodying message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and changing a world of hurt and pain into a world of love.

Some churches like First Presbyterian in Ukiah are doing “Hands and Feet” projects once a month. Instead of sitting in church hearing the word they’ve taken the morning generally reserved for worship to be doers of the word. Over the course of many months now of doing these “hands and feet” projects God has led them to a critical need in Ukiah – their homeless neighbors. So once a month they are sent out from worship to provide and serve breakfast at the shelter. And according to their pastor, Sherry Budke, the church is being “blessed in their doing”. What I am hoping we might do as a congregation is a “Hands and Feet” project once a quarter and before the end of the year that we begin with a project at VOICES. This is part of what you’ll be considering at our conversation on Tuesday evening and again your participation is vital because again we are actually at the stage of deciding to do something.

Now before I bring this message to a conclusion I want to turn your attention back to James because it undergirds this call to move into our neighborhood in acts of love. After James instructs us to “be doers of the word and not merely hearers” he says that our doing, our loving actions are to be directed to orphans and widows – meaning those in need, those who are hurting, those who are powerless, who suffer injustice. James even says that to do this is what pure religion, true religion is all about. The Greek word for religion is “liturgy” and liturgy is the way we worship God. What James is saying then is that true religion, true worship is not what we do during the 10 a.m. hour on a Sunday morning. True liturgy, true worship is this: that we care for those whom God is most concerned, those who are suffering, like widows and orphans. True religion, true worship is not being in church on Sunday. True worship is about being in our neighborhood, embodying the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ in acts of love.

Now if you have been worshiping regularly, you will have noted of late a theme to a lot of my preaching. I’ve sought to inspire and challenge us as a congregation to build upon what we’ve already done in Jesus’ name, to keep being believers that act. Let me share with you a song that inspires and challenges me.

It's called "Help Somebody", sung and written by Susan Werner. (Play CD)

I got plenty and then some
what do I do now
plenty and then some
what do I do
plenty and then some
what do I do no
I got out and help somebody
get plenty and then some, too.

I got a roof over my head
what do I do...
I go out and help somebody
get a roof over their head, too.

I got supper on the table what do I do...
I go out and help somebody
get supper on the table, too.

Refrain: 'cause I got it to give
I got it to give
and when you got enough to give away
well, it's the only way to live

I'm going to heaven
what do I do
I go out and help somebody get to heaven, too

Friends, let's continue to help somebody. Let's be the hands and feet of Christ. Let's be doers of the word and not merely hearers. Friends, we have love to give. Let's do it. And when we do, know that we will be blessed in our doing.

Alleuia! Amen!