

Sermon

“With Our Own Two Hands”

July 21st, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Matthew 25:31-46 and James 2:14-18

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” [NRSV]

James 2:14-18

¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can’t save anyone, can it? ¹⁵ Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶ What if one of you said, “Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!”? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity. ¹⁸ Someone might claim, “You have faith and I have action.” But how can I see your faith apart from your actions? Instead, I’ll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action. [Common English Bible (CEB)]

OPENING PRAYER: Once again, startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God’s people say...Amen.

Ben Harper’s Song

As I’ve mentioned to groups of you before, I often find inspiration for sermons within movies, music, and songs. And, years ago I found a song whose words perfectly capture the idea of mission and service as a Christ-following person of faith. There’s a pleasant acoustic guitar song called “With My Own Two Hands.” It was originally written by a singer-songwriter named Ben Harper in 2003, but it was made a bit more popular and well-known by another singer-songwriter named Jack Johnson, when he included it on the soundtrack for the animated movie *Curious George* back in 2006 (which came out at the perfect time when my daughter was just 3 years old and it’s stuck with me ever since).

The song starts like this with the first two verses:

I can change the world
With my own two hands
Make it a better place
With my own two hands
Make it a kinder place
With my own two hands
With my own
With my own two hands

I can make peace on earth
With my own two hands
I can clean up the earth
With my own two hands
I can reach out to you
With my own two hands
With my own
With my own two hands

These song lyrics focus on how changes in the world *can* come about when a single person—especially a person of faith—decides to take action when given the opportunity.

And, that’s the exact kind of sentiment this worship service is centered around—that our church is providing numerous opportunities and ways for us to get involved in mission and witness activities—to put *our* faith into action over the coming weeks, months, and more. Look again at your bulletin, or think about our monthly newsletter and emails we send out, and you’ll see opportunity after opportunity to put our faith into faithful action—there’s the Community Food Pantry, Baby Love, Meals on Wheels, Thornwell Home for Children, and coming up very soon there will be Family Promise. And, one of these opportunities may be *your* chance to join your family of faith in serving God “with our own two hands.”

Attitude and Faithful Action

Part of why we do these various mission activities is because, in some small way at least, we get what James is saying to people of faith in our reading today—that “faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity” (v.17). You see, friends, James sincerely believes that for Christ-following people there must be a necessary unity of attitude and action. It’s just not enough to have a good Christian attitude about life. It’s not enough to be a disciple of Jesus Christ on an intellectual level—because ultimately God calls each and every one of us to embrace what James teaches us, and then look at the world all around us and say with conviction, “I’ll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action” (v.18). After all, do we really think we’ll get anywhere if we simply learn all the right vocabulary of faith but never do anything to love our neighbor as ourselves? And, does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? No, not really.

We are all given the awesome and precious gift of grace. We don’t deserve it and we can’t earn it. But, as our way of saying, “thank you, God,” we must respond to the gift of grace by choosing a way of life that includes faithful action!

Be Doers of the Word

Sure, it’s awesome when we come to Sunday School and worship on Sunday mornings, or when we gather together in Bible study and prayer, or when we join together for fun and fellowship activities—our community of faith is surely strengthened by all these endeavors. But, at some point, one of those old clichés must apply ... we have to “put our money where our mouth is” ... or we “can’t just talk the talk, we also have to walk the walk.” Or, we have to realize that faith is about much

more than just coming to church—we have to “BE the church.” We have to BE the church by not only being hearers but also being “doers” of God’s word. And, in the weeks and months ahead we will be given many wonderful opportunities to be “doers” of God’s Word by serving God “with our own two hands,” in this community and beyond.

FPC Mission Opportunities

As a community and family of faithful people, we are no strangers to serving God through a variety of mission and witness activities. Over the years, we have changed lives, sometimes our own, through our interactions with other children of God all over the world. We have taken mission trips to places in this state, around the southeast, down in Central America, and maybe beyond in the future. We have served in soup kitchens and food pantries, and we have held the hands of children and the elderly and everyone in between. We have built ramps and decks and houses, and helped give families a new home. Our hands were God’s hands in those places and more. And, our hands will be God’s hands in all the places printed on Announcement pages and newsletters and emails, this week and in the weeks to come, especially for Family Promise.

Just this past Friday, I sent out an email to the congregation that not only provides good information about the Family Promise ministry, but it also invites you to help us collect much needed supplies to get properly ready to be part of this ministry in Newton and Rockdale counties. And, that’s basically just a peek behind the curtain (if you will) because we need more than just your donations—we need lots of volunteers! And, as I’ve promised to Doug Bolton and other organizers helping to get this ministry off the ground, I promise you that there are numerous ways for each of you to get involved and be part of changing more lives in Christ’s name.

Putting Faith into Faithful Action

Sisters and brothers, all these upcoming opportunities with Family Promise, and everything we do, and will continue to do, in so many other places of mission and witness, are about putting our faith into faithful action. Because God calls us to go out into the world, and that means down the hall or down the street, across the town, in another state, or even another part of the world—there’s work to be done everywhere. The location you go matters little compared to actually going to

wherever it may be to serve God in faithful action. And, we go to these places because we *choose* to do so, because part of hearing God’s Word means doing God’s Word—serving God “with our own two hands”—even if that just means putting your own two hands together to pray in support of others (because prayer is just as important as anything else).

The Rest of the Song

And, as I said near the beginning, our church is once again giving us one chance after another to show our faith by putting it into practice in faithful action ... using our own two hands, like the song said. Because using our own two hands is often times the best way to try to change the world, to make it a better place, to make it a kinder place.

And, here are the last two verses of the song:

I'm going to make it a brighter place
 With my own two hands
 I'm going to make it a safer place
 With my own two hands
 I'm going to help the human race
 With my own two hands
 With my own
 With my own two hands

 I can hold you
 With my own two hands
 I can comfort you
 With my own two hands
 But you've got to use
 Use your own two hands
 Use your own
 Use your own two hands

As Christ-following people of faith, our faithful attitudes must result in faithful activity! Change in the world CAN come about when a single person of faith decides to take action. So, if that’s true, imagine what we can accomplish together!

But, we can’t change the world ... and we can’t change lives ... unless we use our own two hands!

Thanks be to God. Amen.