

“What We Do Matters... for the sake of our neighbors”

A Sermon for the Nebraska Synod for Sunday September 5, 2021

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Based on Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Psalm 146; Isaiah 35:4-7a

Grace and peace from God in Christ, who is with you, for you, and who loves you. Amen.

What we do matters. Let me say that again. What we do matters. Now, before Martin Luther rolls over in his grave, and before you start to think I am preaching about works righteousness, let me assure you. I am not. We could never earn God’s saving work. It’s pure gift and grace. So, what we do or don’t do, does not matter for that. Thanks be to God. But... what we do, matters for the sake of our neighbors.

This truth has taken on new meaning for me these past few weeks. You see, I have become rather dependent on others in ways I did not expect this past month. My right foot is bound in a boot, trusting that healing is coming for my ankle and leg. Crutches quite literally have become my way around. And others driving me has become a legal necessity, because I haven’t been able to put weight on my right foot since an unfortunate accident involving tripping and falling because of my dear daughters’ double stroller. What we do matters, not for our own sake but for our neighbors. If it weren’t for the helpful hands of my wife and for her patience, I would be in trouble. If it weren’t for the helpful hands of my parents who can help Allison and me with our daughters and their granddaughters, I would be in trouble. If it weren’t for understanding colleagues who are happy to have me work remotely while hobbling around, I would be in trouble. If it weren’t for the care and concern of my doctor whose advice and direction put me in the boot after x-rays, and whose care will hopefully lead to a healthy and happy outcome, I would be in trouble. The labor and work that we all do, for each other, matters, and makes a difference.

God in Christ- Showing up and healing for you and me

We’re reminded of this in our gospel stories we just heard from the Gospel of Mark. Two different stories about God in Christ showing up and showing compassion. A story about a mom doing everything she can and then some, not for her sake, but to find healing for her daughter. There’s also the story about a man born deaf and with a speech impediment, whom the people bring to Jesus so that he might be cared for, and through whom he receives clear hearing and speaking. Without these acts- of a mother for her daughter, and the community for the deaf man, perhaps they would not have been healed in the same or timely way, for Jesus would not have been invited to act. So, again, what we do matters, for the sake of our neighbors.

Now these stories aren't without controversy. The first comes with the troubling a context of a Syrophenian woman, someone from outside of Jesus' usual community, referring to herself and her community as "dogs."¹

When she makes this move, she humbles herself. But she's also making a claim about who Jesus is, who God is, and what God is up to. She reminds Jesus perhaps even, that he is not called to be Christ to just one community, to just one type of people, or group of people. No. Jesus is called and sent to be Christ to all people. That's just how expansive that God's call and love is. So the woman takes the humbling but faithful step to reply to Jesus' questions and concern about fairness, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."² This retort reminds or teaches Jesus something. He is learning and being corrected by someone who is willing to go as far as she needs to, like any good parent would, for the sake of her child. And that is the truth of God's love. It's not just for you and for me. It's for all people of all experiences, origins, ethnicities, identities and orientations.

Every time, even like Jesus when we might want to focus on just one community, God reminds us that God's love is not limited, scarce, or targeted to just one place. And every time we might try to box God in, God shows up on the other side of our lines, boxes, and categories. The good news of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is just that- Good News for you and for me, and for all of God's beloved. That good news is God's work and promise, for us. Pure gift and grace. But what we do matters in the work of living it out and sharing that abundant love. And what we do matters too, for the sake of our neighbors near and far who may not know, see, or sense God in Christ's presence and call.

The woman who came to find healing for her daughter, goes home to find her healed. The woman who came to Jesus and confronted him about just how expansive God's love is, gives Jesus a reminder of the expansiveness of God's work and mission, and Jesus takes this reminder to heart. He was trying to not be seen while in Tyre, but he couldn't escape being noticed. Especially by a desperate and determined mom. With the woman's answer and because of her faith, her daughter is healed. God has shown up, and God acts. God acts because of faith. God acts because of love. God in Christ acts because he has been humbled, seen, called out, and because he sees another in need whom he loves. Salvation in the form of healing has come near, and it happens again in the second story included in our gospel this week. This time the people notice not only his presence but his acts.

Spreading the Good News of God for the sake of our neighbors- all God's beloved

In the region of Decapolis, the community brings to Jesus a deaf man with a speech impediment. Jesus sees the man, and he acts. He touches him. Literally in our era of pandemic this might seem unclean, but Jesus does what he does for the sake of God's beloved. He puts his fingers in the man's ears. He spits and touches his tongue. He declares, "Be opened."³ And then says to the people who were there not to tell anyone. Well that worked out well. Really, Jesus?

¹ Mark 7:28, NRSV.

² Ibid.

³ Mark 7:34, NRSV.

Really? What do you expect? How do you contain the good news? Especially when, "They were astounded beyond measure."⁴ This is the good and faithful response to God's work for you and me. How could we not be astounded at the extent and acts of God's love? And even if Jesus says, "don't tell anyone," we can't help but tell others. Because that's what the work of the Spirit does. God moves in and through us.

We are moved when we see and sense God's presence and activity. We are then moved to see our neighbors in need. So moved in joy for what God has done, and in love for our neighbors that we can't help but want to give God joy and praise and gratitude. And be so moved that we can't help but want to be part of God's work in the world in some way, which often includes through our very own vocations and through the use and stewarding of all that God entrusts. For through us, with us, and in us, we believe that God acts today too. We even believe that God may use you and me to help our neighbors and share God's love with them. This is holy work. It's part of life as a Baptized and beloved Child of God. It's part of our vocations as disciples, stewards, and Children of God. And it's what it means to be a part of the whole Body of Christ together.

Labor, Vocation, Calling, and Purpose

Within the One Body of Christ, each of us has unique gifts, talents, passions, strengths, and vocations which God has entrusted to us. They help make us each the wonderful and beloved Child of God that we each are. And through each of our unique vocations, we are serving a holy purpose. This isn't a holy purpose that is just left with a few professions or vocations. No. Holy work is not limited to pastors, deacons, and parish ministry associates. Martin Luther helped make this move in writing about the importance of the priesthood of all believers and the fact that each Child of God has a holy calling and vocation or vocations. He wrote about how butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers served holy callings. Providing things, goods, and services, which everyone needed. Their work, their labor, met a need and provided for their neighbors. What they did and what they do mattered and matters for their community.

That was true during the time of the Reformation and it is even more true now. Though Luther took issue with the book of James, where our second lesson comes from this week, given our reminder that what we do matters, James' writing that "Faith without works is dead," might well make more sense. James asks, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."⁵

This isn't to say that food, water, shelter, and clothing provide eternal life. But they sure are important in the day to day living that we all do as Children of God. They sure are important as part of our lives as stewards and disciples in the here and now.

⁴ Mark 7:37, NRSV.

⁵ James 2:14-17, NRSV.

And if we take the psalmist to heart who in Psalm 24 says, that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,” then we remember that we are each God’s own, and all that we have and all that we are, are God’s.⁶ Which God entrusts to our care. So that we might live and live well, live abundantly, but also so that some of God’s work might be done of caring for our neighbors and sharing God’s love with the world as stewards and disciples.

Our gospel stories from Mark about Jesus, remind us of God's work and promises for us. They show us how we are called to respond, give thanks, and join in that work perhaps in our own daily lives in some way, just as the people were astounded to witness Christ’s acts of healing love. We aren't Jesus, thankfully. But we do have the gift of being able to point to God's love through Christ. And we have the opportunity, and more accurately probably as James might argue, even the responsibility, to embody that through our own lives. I wonder what this might look like for you today?

As your partner in ministry for mission, innovation and stewardship, I believe deeply in what is possible through God’s people. I have seen it, time and time again through you and for you. The way the hungry have been fed through your generosity, as well as through the vocations of farmers, ranchers and agriculture of all kinds that many of you serve through. The way that the hurting and broken, have been prayed for and cared for through your love, concern, and compassion, as well as through the vocations of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and medical professionals that many of you serve through.

The way the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee who simply hopes for a safe place to lay their head, to care for their family and go about a day of meaningful work, has been welcomed by you; through the way so many of you serve as disciples and stewards of God’s love. The way the Good News of Christ has been shared and is shared through your congregation, and each of you in your vocations as baptized Children of God. Yes, God does show up through you and me, for each other and for our neighbors. Thank you for making room and for responding to God’s call and invitation to you in all the ways you do.

Your Labors Matter

On this Labor Day weekend, the meaning of daily work takes on even greater significance. For if we each have a holy calling in our lives as Luther argues, we each then have the opportunity to help our neighbors in some unique ways. Whether it be as the butcher and baker or farmer, rancher and agricultural workers, in providing food for the world so that all might be fed. Or through the candlestick maker, electrician, and power and utility workers, so that all might have power, phone, internet access and so that they can stay connected and comfortable in their own home. Or through the teacher, volunteer, mentors, parents; so that all might be able to see, read, learn, know, and think. Through the work of doctors, nurses, scientists, researchers, and medical professionals; so that all might be cared for and healed.

⁶ From Psalm 24:1, NRSV.

And in this time of pandemic still- through the development, administering, and receiving of vaccines which can move us past this deadly virus finally and help us care for and protect our neighbors who right now are vulnerable to this mutating virus- especially children like my own who can't be vaccinated yet because they are under 12, and others who might be immunocompromised. Please, if you can be and have not yet been vaccinated, please get the vaccine. If not for your sake, for the sake of your loved ones and neighbors.

Part of our vocation too as neighbors, is to have at the very least prayerful and heartfelt sympathy. But there's so much more we can do, believing that our prayer leads to action. Through our lives as stewards and disciples, I hope and pray that we will be signs of God's kingdom building work as we welcome the stranger and refugee as Christ welcomes us. May we do so, alongside our partners through Lutheran Family Services, to welcome Afghan Refugees fleeing their homeland for the safety of a new day and a place where they might call home, to be able to rest their heads, and make an honest living. May we do so, by seeing and holding up grieving families in our midst, who are mourning the death of marines and service people who have aided their Afghan neighbors, and who serve at all times so that we might be able to live as we do. May we do so, by helping all those in need to receive the care and compassion that Christ provides for us, and for the mother and daughter, and man in today's stories.

God's work is for you and for me, thanks be to God.

God's work is for you, and for me. When we remember all that God has done- God's healing and saving work like our gospel stories tell us; and the saving work of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for you and me, we can't help but be amazed and be filled with joy and gratitude. So much so that we are moved to join God in some of God's work in the world. To join in God's work of justice and peace. To join and participate in God's work of welcome, inclusion, and reconciliation. The work of showing and living through all that we all are and all that we do, that God is love, and as each of us is God's beloved, we are to share that love with everyone. That's where our lives as stewards and disciples really take off. When our daily work becomes more than just a job or labor- but a vocation, as a holy calling, where we meet our neighbors' needs and are in relationship with one another.

That's a holy thing. That God in Christ makes possible through God's abundant and abiding love for you and for me. Thanks be to God for you and all that you do as the beautiful and beloved Child of God that you are. And thanks be our amazing and loving God who knows us, claims us, calls us, and loves us. Always. Amen.