

Things are really starting to get interesting. The Spirit is stirring things up in the little community of Jerusalem. To refresh your memory, the band of Christian believers is still trying to coexist with the traditional Jewish community. They’re still gathering at the temple and answering to its authorities. But the number of believers has grown by leaps and bounds. New people were coming in, and some of them spoke different languages, and came from different places. Living together is getting more complicated. There are expectations of how followers of Jesus would live and treat each other, and those expectations aren’t always getting met. Remember in Acts 4, we heard that people were sharing all they had; that no one lacked for anything. But clearly, now in chapter 6, some are lacking. [v. 1: “In those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”] The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews from faraway lands; the Hebrews were Aramaic-speaking Jews from Palestine. Blending cultures is hard work. Now maybe folks were being excluded or forgotten, or maybe there just wasn’t enough to go around; regardless, little cracks are starting to appear in the community.

The apostles’ response makes me as a pastor cringe a bit. They kind of make it sound like taking care of these issues is beneath them. [v. 2: “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.”] But it hasn’t exactly been a picnic for them either. The community may be growing, but they’re the only folks really sticking their necks out. They’re the ones out preaching in Solomon’s Portico. They’re the ones teaching and healing, and getting arrested, and thrown in prison. And maybe the stress of trying to be all things to all people is getting to them too.

I don't think they're implying that "praying and preaching the word" are more important than feeding the widows and visiting the lonely. Clearly there's a need, and the apostles are quick to find people with the right gifts to fill that need. They want to spread around the responsibility that comes with being the church.

This isn't a new concept, by the way. God's people have always worked best when they're sharing the load. When the Israelites were wandering the wilderness Moses couldn't handle mediating their disputes, so his father-in-law Jethro suggested he find a few fair, logical men to help sort things out. Jesus sent the disciples out two by two because they could reach a lot more people than he could alone. Here, the apostles select seven capable men to administer the work – and, to emphasize just how important their work is, they bless them, pray for them, and commission them. (v. 6) And God must have been pleased, because – v. 7 – “the word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.

You know what I like about this passage? It's a great reminder that each of us makes a difference in expanding God's kingdom. The church in Acts started growing because of compelling preaching, then from a sense of community as people gathered to break bread and pray. But here it sounds as people are being converted because of how they see folks living out their faith.

You know what that is? Ministry. Now I bet if I asked you to point at the ministers in this room there are a number of people who'd aim right up at the front row. But as Lyle Solum said yesterday at our visioning retreat, we need to remember that the ministers of this church aren't the pastors, they're you. You. Turn to the person next to you and say, *You are a minister*. How'd that sound? Ministry isn't just preaching and

teaching about Jesus. It isn't limited to what goes on within the walls of the church. It all the ways we reach out in Jesus' name.

Last spring I was doing interviews with our 9th grade confirmands. The most powerful one was with a young man who said, "I love going on mission trips because that's when it all becomes real. I really feel like I'm being the hands of Jesus, you know. That God is really using me to help someone else."

I love that ... but I'd want to challenge that young man – and all of us – to think about this:

What if we were to start naming everything we do as God's work? If we were to think of the things we do – no matter how seemingly insignificant – as being done by Jesus? How would you approach your day differently? Would it give you a better sense of purpose, of satisfaction, of hope? Too often we think that what we do really doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Our efforts aren't worth all that much. It's not that big a deal. Someone else can do it. But what if you were to approach your day and think "somehow what I'm doing is very important for God's sake." Because it is, you know. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote: "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands with which he blesses the world. Christ has no body but yours." It may be God's work but they are your hands.

That idea really gets at the heart of stewardship as a way of life. It's all about giving of ourselves so that others might know Jesus, Ultimately it's believing that what we do with what we have matters to God. It's looking at our everyday tasks and thinking, I am doing God's work. Say that with me. *I am doing God's work*. When I go to Mazeppa today to clean up after the floods *I am doing God's work*. When I get together

with a group of 7th grade confirmands who aren't sure what they believe *I am doing God's work*. When I get together with a friend over coffee to encourage them *I am doing God's work*. When I take the time to listen to a different point of view *I am doing God's work*. When I stop spending on myself so I can give to others *I am doing God's work*. These may be my hands but it is God's work, and my friends, God can do a whole lot more than I can.

The danger is, when we do God's work we get messy. Life gets messy. Sometimes we have to take risks and stretch ourselves. Sometimes people don't like what we're doing. It happened for the early Christians. Stephen was going to stick his neck out and be bold. He was doing it in a way where he was following the convictions of his heart, like we talked about last week. And ultimately, standing up for what he believed cost Stephen his life. But every step of the way he became more like Jesus, so much so that with his last breath he prayed for God to forgive those who killed him.

Sometimes doing God's work means sticking our neck out, too. It means speaking the truth in love to a family member who has an addiction. It means being strong and standing with the abused woman who can't stand up for herself. It means spending a gorgeous October Saturday inside dreaming about the future of the church. It means trying something new even if we're not sure we like it for the sake of those who are not yet here.

Here's the truly amazing thing: just when it appeared as though all hope for the church was lost – God found a way to use the hands of the believers to spread the Word. Even when the church was scattered Jesus' love spread one person at a time, one act of kindness at a time, one work of love at a time. They may be our hands but it is God's work and God will not be defeated.

Take a look at your hands for a minute. It doesn't matter if they're big or small, if they're strong or swollen with arthritis. They're still the most powerful tools you own. With them you can give a pat on the back, wave a greeting, applaud a performance. You can write a letter, type an email, sign a check. You can tie a shoe, fix a meal, knit a blanket, share the peace. Little things, all of them, but one touch at a time they might be what makes God's love real for someone else. And in so doing, they might be what makes God's love real for you.

The reality, my friends, is that it's not up to us to bring God out to the world. God is already there. The man on the bus, the woman at the supermarket, the child in the pew behind you ... God is already with them, waiting to make his love apparent. And God will do it through you. God's work. Your hands. Together they can't be beat. Amen.