

HEARTBEATS- Staying Connected 9/6/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, September 7 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those places in the world that are facing political and civil unrest. Pray specifically for Cuba, Haiti, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Palestine and Israel. Ask for God's peace to come upon those places. Pray for those who have lost loved ones and their homes due to violence and unrest.

Occasionally, I've talked about how the church sometimes forgets what it is that we are to be about. We forget about the instructions Jesus gave and get comfortable with the things we've come to think are most important. I've talked about how Jesus called us to be missional—to “go and make disciples”—yet we've become doctrinal—putting our energy into trying to make sure everyone believes the same thing. And often we've done that at the expense of the work to which Jesus called us.

Another example is how we've lost track of how Jesus developed His followers. They didn't sit around the campfire and listen to lectures from Jesus on Christian theology. Instead, Jesus told stories, set examples, and put them in situations that taught how to be His representatives in the world. Through His parables, His own actions, and the missions upon which He sent them out, they learned about offering hospitality, praying together, healing others, and meeting the needs of people where they were in their own lives.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has tried to capture this process through the “God's Work. Our Hands” program. This annual event (and I think we desperately need to be doing this more than once a year, but it's a start) challenges congregations to develop projects that, at least for a day, will have a positive impact on some area beyond the boundaries of the church property. Certainly, the pandemic has made this harder to do both last year and this year. Yet we will do this next week by putting together baby kits for distribution.

Unfortunately, too often, I see churches doing “God's Work. Our Hands” and other service projects from a perspective of “us doing something for them.” And it is usually done from a distance through what we can buy or how much we can donate without ever having direct contact with those to whom God sends us to serve. We have the commitment to help, but we lack the commitment to help directly. More importantly, we still see our efforts as “what can we do *for* them?” instead of “how can we be *with* them to help them?”

A few years ago, the last church I served decided that for “God's Work. Our Hands,” they wanted to do something for the Bridge House, the ninety-bed homeless shelter. People were allowed to live there up to three months while they tried to get training and employment. The congregation decided that they wanted to fix a meal for them. They would prepare it at the church and then drop it off at the Bridge House. But, after talking about the difference between

“doing for” and “doing with” they decided to revise their plan to fix the meal and to eat it along side the homeless folks. The idea expanded to include bring games and other activities that everyone could play or do together. On that Sunday afternoon and evening, a number of people joined the residents of Bridge House and together sat outside and ate and played and talked. At the end of the day, some of the residents said, “You’re the first group that has taken the time to get to know us. Others give us stuff and we appreciate that, but you sat with us and listened to our stories and got to know us as people.”

Donations are important for helping in places to which we can not easily go. They are necessary for addressing needs that are beyond our abilities both in terms of distance and qualifications. Yet there are many needs that are also close by. “God’s Work. Our Hands” challenges us to find places where we can actually use our hands to help people and expand our vision for discipleship by getting to know those who live and work around us. It begins by recognizing that Jesus doesn’t just tell us about them. No, Jesus’ vision goes far beyond that. Jesus sends us to them.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey