

ST. PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH, AMHERST, OHIO
SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

EMPOWERING GOD'S PEOPLE

SENDING

Today we are wrapping up a short series on **EMPOWERING GOD'S PEOPLE**. Two weeks ago we looked at habit number one — that we're going to develop relationships with people far from God.

And 2 weeks ago we said there are 3 dimensions in Jesus' life: Up, In, and Out. Up refers to relationship with God the Father, IN is our relationships with other believers, and OUT is about serving people in the world around us and sharing the truth of Jesus' forgiveness, and hope with them. We are talking about the OUT dimension in our lives – relationships with friends, neighbors, relatives, and people we work and do business with. We want to share Jesus with all.

And we all received an assignment to do – that each of us will invite 1 person or a few people closer. That we will strive to just further establish the relationship that we've begun with them.

Last week we talked about the second habit which has to do with starting conversations about spiritual matters.

We used the letters that spell the word "idea" to help us remember the words Initiate, Discern, Explain, and Ask.

The most natural way to Initiate a spiritual conversation, we said is to show interest and care for people by asking questions. For example, when you're talking about the pandemic and all the people who've died, ask your friend to share his or her thoughts. "What do you think happens to those people who've died?"

Or a friend is going thru a crisis in their life. It could be an illness, , a financial crisis, a relationship break up, or someone they love has died. A question you could ask to lead to a spiritual conversation might be "Do you have anything by way of spiritual support in your life? Do you think that might be helpful?"

And when it comes to Discerning and Explaining we shared this spiritual conversation curve. You discern by asking God to guide you when it's time to move from the blue part that is focused on building relationships, to the yellow part, and then to the orange section. The yellow part is simply, you tell your life story. And the orange is simply answering your friend's questions as best you can. All this is in the brochure we gave out called "How to Talk About Your Faith." And there are copies of that on the wall with free resources in the lobby. And you can always go to St. Paul's website to listen to or read last week's message.

Today, we're talking about how we are SENT. We are to GO to people around us. We GO to get involved in other people's lives. We don't wait for them to come to our sanitized and sanctified little group of Christian church friends. We are SENT by Jesus to GO and love people as He has loved us.

When I was a kid growing up, in Sunday school there was a song that we used to sing. Maybe a few of you will have heard this song when you were kids. They'd go through different body parts, and it went something like this: "Be careful little feet where you go. Be careful little mouth what you say. Be careful little hands what you do." I never liked that song because it felt kind of negative to me, like there was big brother out there watching or something.

But there's another way of understanding that song, a real positive way. You could understand it to be saying, "I want my feet to lead me to the places where Jesus' feet would lead Him. And I want my hands to do the kinds of things that Jesus' hands would do. And I want my little mouth to say the kinds of things that Jesus' mouth would say." I think God will answer that prayer.

So the question I want to ask you today is, "Do your feet take you where Jesus' feet took Him?" "Do your hands reach out and touch things Jesus reached out to touch?"

Where *DID* Jesus' feet take him? What *DID* Jesus reach out and touch?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus had just invited His disciples to follow Him. Jesus told these professional fishermen, "**From now on**

you will be catching men.” What did Jesus do to train these wanna be disciples? He didn’t sit them down for a class on how to catch people. He did not send them to a school for three years to learn what it means to be a minister. He did not send them to a seminary or a workshop. He sent them to OUT with Him -- into the villages, into the mission field.

Jesus empowered his followers by sending them out. He knew that this is the best way to learn how to do something.

Jesus brought them along where HIS feet went. His feet took Him to people far from God all the time. His feet took him where the Pharisees feet would never take them — to parties at tax collector’s houses, to dinners attended by prostitutes, to the country of Samaria where a respectable religious leader would never go, to lepers and 10,000 pagans — just to people, to every kind of people. And Jesus’ feet got him into serious trouble.

You know, when Jesus was called the friend of sinners, we think of that as a lovely title. It was not intended that way. That was meant to be a title of derision, of hostility — friend of sinners. Jesus was with them, and Jesus loved them.

Jesus’ hands got Him into trouble too. And we see Jesus use both His feet and hands in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus’ feet take Him into this city and a leper approaches Jesus, and the man asks to be made clean. Now, the law was real strict about people who had the disease of leprosy. They couldn’t have any contact with non-lepers. They had to cry out, "Unclean!" so that healthy people would use their feet to turn and walk or run away. Lepers had to stay outside of the village. If they even touched somebody’s house, it was supposed to be torn down because it was considered to be unclean.

Nobody could come within 10 feet of a leper. But this leper comes up to Jesus. The man knelt and bowed before Jesus. ***“Lord,” he said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.”*** Luke 5:12

Jesus’ feet brought Him to this town, and Jesus’ feet didn’t turn around to run away. Jesus reaches out His hand and touches this man who had not been touched for who knows how many years? Not

by his children, not by his spouse. Jesus didn't have to do that. He could have just said a word, but Christ reached out with His hand and touched the man and said, "Be clean." Luke tells us, ***"instantly the leprosy disappeared."***

What I love about this true episode is that we are in this story too. You and I are just like that man with leprosy. He was desperate – at the end of his rope. The only one who could help him was Jesus. So he goes, throws himself down in the dust and begs Jesus for mercy. And Jesus' response was one of pure grace. Jesus didn't run away, but stretched out His hand and healed him.

You and I have the leprosy of sin eating away at our hearts and souls. We are outcasts from God eternally, and we've got no hope to heal ourselves. When we finally give up on our pride and self-reliance, and throw ourselves down in humble confession before Jesus, admitting the truth about ourselves, and just begging for His mercy – Jesus doesn't run away. Instead, He stretched out His hands – on the cross. He took a nail in each hand to give you by PURE GRACE the healing that you really need, -- the forgiveness of sins. By His gift of forgiveness, Christ brings us into the society of God's people where we have hope for living today, and eternal life in heaven to come. Friends, this is God's gift to you today. Believe it! And find relief and hope and joy!

We are also in this story, taking the part of the disciples. Now that we are forgiven and welcomed by Jesus, every one of us, too, are His followers. We are SENT. We learn by following Jesus. We go where His feet went and touch what He reached out to touch. While receiving the free gift of grace from Jesus is crucial, this does not mean that we just sit on our hands and receive. Instead, God empowers us.

You learn from Jesus as you are sent. We have got to agree to get out of the holy huddle. Our primary aim in life is not to socialize only with other Christians and end up living in a religious ghetto. You and I have got to have feet like Jesus' feet, and hands like Jesus' hands. For most of us, this does not mean so much that you have to start going to new places. For most of us, this means that we start

forming relationships in circles where you already find yourself. You do this in a way that fits your world.

This story by Hugh Halter, a pastor in Colorado shows us how God used him, and can use you too.

Steve was the first guy to help unload our U-Haul when we pulled in to our new home in the Denver area. He and his wife Jen were very kind to us. We started to notice Steve came home every day at 4 o'clock. So Cheryl and I bought two white rocking chairs from Wal-Mart, put them out on the front porch and we just committed to always have coffee at 4 o'clock every day.

I noticed Steve had two dogs. He'd get home, let the dogs out of the garage and throw a tennis ball to them. I had two dogs too, same type, Labradors, so I bought some tennis balls so I would have something to throw. I started to throw the ball to our dogs. Jen would come sit in my chair next to Cheryl and over months we became friends.

We tried to do things that would let them know that we cared about them. They started to invite us to hang out with their kids. Steve started inviting me to his poker nights with his buddies and we invited them to dinners and parties.

One day when Steve and I were talking, Jen came out and said, "I have a question for you." She paused. "How do you forgive God?" I said, "Is there a story behind that?" And she started to cry. I said, "Do you want to tell me now?" She said, "No, I'm not ready yet," so I said, "OK, I'll work on your question, but if you ever want to tell me, I'd love to hear it."

A couple months later, when I was with Steve, hearing a bit of his story, she came out and told me the reason she was having a hard time forgiving God was that three days before their wedding her dad was killed in a car wreck.

We talk about the need to be a missionary community.

Missionaries know how to get the context for the gospel—context just means the story. So every person has their own context. If we don't know somebody's story I'm not so sure we're going to know how to embed or nuance the gospel in a way that will make sense.

As we talked about that experience they started to unpack how they gave up on the Catholic church. Eventually they just became a part of our church community and their whole family came to faith in Jesus.

Most of these conversion stories involve a process. Most of them are two-year stories—and hundreds of meals together. When people read our stories, they may think, well, Hugh's an evangelist. He leads somebody to the Lord every week. It isn't like that. It's just that there have always been people we were praying for, and we were trying to wedge our friends into every second we could, with whatever energy we had.

Friends, I think that's a great example of what it means in our world today, to have hands and feet like Jesus. Did you notice that the neighbors, Steve and Jen, initiated the relationship. They came over to unload the moving truck. They liked Hugh and his wife, Cheryl. Steve and Jen are receptive people to Hugh and Cheryl's relationship. Two weeks ago we said they are "People of Peace" or good soil, who are eager to hear.

Notice Hugh and Cheryl simply prayed, showed they cared, were intentional about making time for building the relationship with Jen and Steve. And God did the rest.

There are not enough preachers to proclaim the Gospel to your friend. And I'm not sure that they need a preacher anyway. Most people today don't want be preached at. They want a friend who will listen to them. They want someone who will pray with them. They want someone who will walk with them and be there when they need them. God has called you to this.

Friends, Christianity is not about you come to church, observe special religious acts, hear good sermons, while a special few do the ministry. In other words, we are wrong, and misguided when we assume that if we believe the right things then we don't need to be a follower of Jesus. Our feet and hands don't need to look like Jesus' feet and hands.

Friends, we are called to be disciples of Jesus' way. We are not merely believers who believe, teach and confess the right doctrine. We are also those who follow in his steps.

So take a look at your hands for a moment. How often are they extended to service to someone who's far from God? Maybe you have a neighbor that you could shovel snow or do an errand for. Maybe there's somebody at work that feels discouraged, and these hands could write him a note, touch their heart. Maybe there's a lonely person in your world. Are your hands doing what Jesus' hands would do?

Sometimes people think or wonder, "Is pastor just disguising a form of using people? Is pastor telling us to just pretend to be a friend in order to get a spiritual commitment out of somebody." Well, that's not the idea.

The idea is not, "I'll pretend to be nicer than I am to help me make a sale." And, "I hope this seeker converts soon so I can go back to being my normal nasty self because it's a strain being nice for so long." The idea is to just love people. Just love them.

Jesus gave up everything for you. Your salvation cost Him His life! He went to the cross so that you could have forgiveness from your sins and come into His kingdom. He suffered and died for the whole world.

Now He is sending you and me out to the world to share His love. You really can have feet like Jesus' feet. You can have feet that take you to where people are far from God because they're all over the place.