

No Hands on Earth But Yours

October 2, 2016

In the summer of 2000, I led a mission trip of 50 teens who were doing home repairs on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. On these trips, we always try to stress solidarity with those in need. We eat simply; we rely on the kindness of host churches along the way. We look to see how God is alive and active in the communities we serve.

As we were journeying to Rosebud, we spent the evening on the floor of a tiny little mission church in Porcupine, South Dakota, and from there we visited Wounded Knee. There, we met with a distant relative of one of the survivors of that massacre. Her witness was prayerful and haunting. We were all in a pensive mood as we crossed the street from the battle site to the cemetery. There, at the top of the hill, stands a statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched in that “come to me all you who are burdened” pose.

Back in the summer of 2000, the hands of the statue had been broken off – I couldn’t tell if it was from exposure to the elements or vandalism. It was disheartening either way, that in this place where so much hurt and violence had happened, an item of beauty, however culturally out of place, was now scarred, too. My heart was heavy, as I climbed the hill to have a better look at the memorial. It wasn’t until I was almost on top of the statue that I saw that someone had scrawled in orange crayon at its base – orange crayon, I kid you not – “Christ has no hands on earth but yours.”

No book of theology has ever brought home the concept that we are all members of the Body of Christ the way the graffiti at that memorial did. Christ has no hands on earth but yours.

Today, we join hundreds of thousands of Christians around the world in celebrating World Communion Sunday. Today, Christian communities the world over are coming together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, not only with the people who gather within the walls of their church, but spiritually with people of every race, every economic class, every life situation imaginable. We gather in com-union, united with believers everywhere, each of whose lives form the Body of Christ here on earth. We gather with mega-churches and storefront churches and churches that meet under the azure blue sky of the Sahara. We gather to give thanks and praise to our God by whose cross and resurrection we have been set free. We gather to be nourished and to be healed.

We gather in a world in which God’s message to the prophet Habakkuk couldn’t be more relevant. After Habakkuk rails at God, “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” (1:2) God tells Habakkuk, “If it is slow in coming, wait. It’s on its way. It will come.” (2:3 from The Message) Our world abounds with need that is slow in being met. When Habakkuk shakes his fist at God, he is lifting up both the strife of individuals and the discord of communities:

God’s message is not only to Habakkuk, not only to the destitute and the downtrodden, but to all who are weary, “If it is slow in coming, wait. It’s on its way. It will come.” (2:3 from The Message)

In 2007, former president Jimmy Carter, on a peace building mission in Darfur, created a bit of a scuffle when he tried to modify his itinerary after he decided that he needed to go to meet with a tribal chief. He did this after determining that the individuals of the tribe were not talking with his contingent because they were fearful of repercussions if they were to share their stories with him. Eventually, a compromise was reached and the tribal chief came to meet with Carter. What is interesting here is that despite their unwillingness to talk with the peace builders, reporters noted that the people of Darfur instead were stuffing notes into the pockets of the diplomats.

One of those notes read, “You are our voice. Make sure the world hears our story.” Make sure the world hears our story.

Christ has no hands on earth but ours.

In the United Church of Christ, we receive the yearly Neighbors in Need offering on World Communion Sunday, because as we gather as the Body of Christ, we are called to become God’s healing presence in the world. Communion is a celebration not only of thanksgiving and nourishment and healing, it is also a celebration of commissioning. As we gather at the Communion table with more members of the Body of Christ than on any other day of the year, we are confronted with the reality that if Christ has no hands on earth but ours, we have some work to do. We consume the sacred, praying that somehow God will give us the courage, wisdom, creativity, and grace to be a part of the building of the reign of God. We are commissioned to carry the sacred into our dealings with our children, as we instill in them God’s vision of wholeness and peace, we are commissioned to carry the sacred into the ballot box, as we build a society in which not only God’s justice but also God’s mercy and compassion rule the day, we are commissioned to carry the sacred to the streets and to the far corners of the world, that all may know that love is stronger than hate and a new way is possible.

When, during the Last Supper, Jesus says, “Take this, all of you and eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in memory of me,” an easy reading is to think that he is telling us to gather to share a communal meal in his honor. I’d like to suggest to you today that the “this” which Jesus tells his followers to do is much, much richer than that. He is telling us to give of ourselves for the sake of justice and hope. He is telling us to live as he did, with lives full of forgiveness and creative problem solving. He is telling us to trust God as he did, and be agents of God’s mercy and grace. He is telling us to fill ourselves up on the sacred, and he will always be with us in the most intimate ways imaginable.

Christ has no hands on earth but ours.

The Gospel passage that we read today begins with the disciples asking Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith,” and Jesus responding, “If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Have you ever tried it? I’m assuming that at least a few of you have at least some faith. Yet I doubt you’ve been able to do your landscaping through prayer alone. Whenever I hear this passage, it is tempting to envision a life of faith modeled on the mind tricks of Johnny Carson’s “Amazing Carnac.” But our God is not a God of magic wands. Rather than an abracadabra faith that some imagine this passage to suggest, what Jesus actually tells the disciples that YOU’VE already got all of the faith you need. With faith YOU can accomplish unimaginable things. The

passage goes on to tell us that acting in faith isn't something we do as an extra, isn't an add on, but is part and parcel of the Christian life.

If God is telling us in Habakkuk that change is coming, then Jesus is telling us with the mustard seed that by virtue of our faith, we are called to be agents of that change. A life of faith is one that seeks new possibilities, one that believes in Jesus' new covenant of forgiveness and restoration, one that honors the greater good. As we gather around the Communion table, let us pray for the courage to take up this challenge.

After all, Christ has no hands on earth but ours...

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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 17:5-10
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