

“Loving God with your Hands”

Mark 12:28-31; James 1:22-25, 2:14-17

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This sermon is the third in a series of sermons I’m preaching on the Four Hs—how we love God with our head, heart, hands, and habits. Just like we need a balanced diet of foods to have physical energy, we need that in our spiritual lives, too. You need to do all four, to live a balanced life. Like if you unscrew one leg off your kitchen table, it becomes wobbly. If all you eat is ice cream, it tastes good for a while and you get a sugar rush, but you’ll end up crashing and feeling all shaky. You need a balanced diet.

Today I want to talk about the hands. How do we follow Jesus by the way we serve? Because when we serve, we’re a part of the good works that God is doing in the world. It’s a way of saying thank you to God for what he’s done in our lives. If we experience God’s love, if we really hear his call in our life, it’s what we do in response. Like James says, “Be doers of the word, and not only hearers.” Otherwise it’s like the guy who looks into the mirror and forgets what he looks like when he walks away. He’s only conscious of the message as long as he’s contemplating it, but it doesn’t change anything in his life. If we do good works without the motivation of faith, they’re simply an attempt to get right with God or to assert ourselves. But if we have faith and don’t serve others, that’s not real faith. James tells us faith without works is dead. Faith makes a difference.

I think of the work of Mary Goodman and Nancy Kule with the food closet. They serve a lot of people who are struggling to pay the bills each month, and those people are able to get food and help with groceries. Did you know there’s a line of people coming into the church every Thursday to get help? Mary and Nancy’s concern for others produces actions, not just words. It should be the same for our relationship with Jesus. If faith doesn’t produce any action on our part, then how real is it? How alive is it? Just like a tree that doesn’t produce any leaves, a faith that doesn’t produce anything is dead. It’s why the Bible says, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6)

So how has your faith affected your lifestyle? That’s always the test. Real faith has to be put into practice. That’s why loving God with our hands, with what we do, is so important, because when we serve others, it’s faith expressing itself. It’s when we present Jesus to other people. That’s how we make him real in their experience. That happens in a couple ways:

First, when we love God with our hands by serving, Jesus becomes more real to the people around us.

A lot of people in our country think Christianity is boring or irrelevant, and I think the reason they think that is because they’ve heard us Christians talk about it, but they haven’t really seen us do anything about it.

If our good works grow out of living faith, that’s powerful, and it makes an impact. When that happens, we’re partners with God, his hands in the world as we respond to his Word and are filled with his Holy Spirit.

Now, it's important to get the order straight. We don't get saved by doing good things; salvation is always through the gift of faith. It's not like God says, "You obey me, you do enough, and I'll love you." No! God always loves us first, reaches out to save us first, and we respond by trusting him, and even that trust is a gift of God working in us and opening our heart to him. But how real can our faith be if it doesn't result in changed lives? If faith is real, it always leads to action, to serving others, and that's how we make his love real to others. It's why Peter says,

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness... and to brotherly kindness, love...But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. (2 Peter 1:5, 7b, 9)

God tells us to flesh our faith, to put skin on it, to show it in the way we live. That's where we get the pattern of good works. That's why Christians stayed in ancient Rome when the plague hit and everyone else who could left the city. It's why Christians have been the ones who founded hospitals and charities and orphanages and universities. They were working out their salvation, not earning God's favor, but boldly making known Jesus, because he had changed their lives so much.

So we don't do good to try to earn eternal life. Eternal life is the gift of God. We don't do good to show off or to win points with others. We do it to show how grateful we are, and so others can see the real Jesus. That's why the apostle Paul says,

"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Ephesians 4:1)

Living out life in a way worthy of our calling means showing God's love to others. It's expressing our salvation, making an event of it, making it concrete in our life and action by showing God's love and making Jesus real to others. How do we do that? There are a million ways! Paul doesn't give us a manual of operations. He simply says,

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Ephesians 2:4)

And again,

"Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives." (Titus 3:14)"

And what's the purpose of those works? Jesus tells us in Matthew,

"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

The purpose of serving others is to make God's love real. In our culture, the only way people are really going to know who Jesus is if they have an experience of him through how we serve them. When we do that, Jesus isn't just an idea, because we become for them Jesus with skin on.

That's why we're doing the pig roast today. We're throwing a party for our community just to say "we love you." I encourage you to show up and just get to know someone who comes for

the fun afternoon. It's fun to talk with our church friends and you can do that, but take the time to talk with someone you *don't* know. Just reach out and be friendly, and if someone asks you why we're doing it, just say "We just want to serve you. We want to show the love of Jesus." All of us can do that much. When we follow Jesus with our hands by serving it makes him more real to those around us.

But it's more than that.

Second, when you love God with our hands by serving, it also makes him more real to you.

The things we do physically, in our bodies, are more real to us than the things we just think in our heads or feel in our hearts. It's like driving a stick shift or golf, you can read about it all you want, but until you do those things physically, they don't seem real to you, they're just ideas. Once you do it, you never forget how, it becomes a part of you, and it becomes real. Like riding a bike; once you learn how, it's a part of you, and you remember.

It's the same with our faith. We can have all the head knowledge about Jesus in the world, we can have a great heart connection to Jesus, our spiritual habits can be fantastic, and those three Hs are important; but if it doesn't get to our hands, if we don't act on it, it will never be real to us. Doing makes it more real. It's when we love others with Christ's love that we begin to experience it as real in our hearts.

I think our deacons are a great example of this. Last Christmas they decided to find a way to reach out to shut-in people in nursing homes here in town. They got care packets together, and made visits to people that might have felt forgotten this time of year. I heard about one of those people who asked them, "Why are you doing this?" One of our deacons was able to say, "Well, we've been talking about how it's important to serve our community, and that's why." So many of you are serving in so many ways already, and I mean this to be an encouragement, not a guilt trip, like, "Great, now I've got to serve." It's meant to be an invitation, a way to see Jesus, to experience him as more than just head knowledge, but a real person.

For others of you, your whole life is service, because that's your job, or you've got aging parents or a spouse you're taking care of. The question for you isn't, should you be doing more? Probably not. The question for you is, how can Jesus be more a part of what you're already doing? Maybe by praying for the people you serve, so it becomes more than doing good deeds, but is filled with the Holy Spirit who makes those good deeds point to Jesus. And I know you're busy. Serving doesn't have to add that much time to our schedule, but offer to the Lord what it is you usually do.

It reminds me of Brother Lawrence. He was a Carmelite monk in the 17th century in Paris, and his whole job was to cook and clean the kitchen for the monastery. He decided he would do that service as if he was doing it for Jesus, and he developed an amazing prayer life right in the midst of it. His connection with the Lord, in his case, didn't change what he did, it changed *how* he did it, and that made all the difference, and he found purpose and joy in what couldn't been nothing but dull drudgery.

Maybe some of us need to serve in Jesus' name as a part of what we're already doing, or trim some things out of our schedule so we can serve and know Jesus better. There's no end of ways to do that. You can help teach Sunday school, or lead a small group, or help with the sanctuary team, or serve outside the church on a mission trip like Kelly Lupas is doing in Honduras, or help feed the hungry. Why do you think she loves doing that? Because as she

does it, as she loves Jesus with her hands, she experiences him more, and sees him in the people she serves.

I have a friend who had the chance to witness to a young man in prison. My friend happened to be going through a painful time in his own life, but he took the time to talk with a young prisoner who needed some care. The young man was twenty-six years old, pierced and tattooed, and he looked really scary. My friend said, "How did you end up here?" The young man said, "When I was six years old, my father left us. Two years later, my mother called me to her and told me my father had committed suicide. A year later, my older brother committed suicide. My mother couldn't handle the pain, so she killed herself." The young prisoner's eyes filled with tears, and he went on, "Now the only one I've got is my thirteen year old little sister, and I have to take care of her. I thought I could get away with robbing a 7-11, but I was caught." My friend told him about Jesus, and how much he loves him, and he's helping him get connected with a church that can pray for him and help support him once he's released from jail.

As he did that, he realized that that's what he was there for, not just to give a bunch of words or arguments, but to give words made flesh, to take what he believes and live it out, in his body, through his hands, as he served. And he told me how real Jesus is to him in moments like that.

That's who Jesus is. He's a servant, God himself, who came in human form, who came to serve us. He taught us, he loved us, he even washed his disciples' feet. He died for us to show us how much he loves us.

That's what Christianity is all about. It's the good news that:

Jesus came down, so we might be lifted up; he became poor, so we might become rich; he was born so we could be born again; he became a servant, so we can become sons and daughters of the King.

He became homeless, so we might have a home in heaven; he became hungry, so that we might be fed; he became thirsty so that we might be satisfied; he was rejected so that we might be accepted; he was sad so that we might be happy; he was imprisoned so that we could go free; he was made sin so that we could be made clean; he died so that we might live.

That's what service does; it takes our words and beliefs and makes them flesh, like Jesus was God's love for the world in flesh and blood.

So, I'd like to invite you to spend some time this week thinking about where you might be out of balance on these four Hs, and where you might want to invest some time so that you can know Jesus more. For many of us it will be how we serve others with our hands. Because when we serve, when it's not just about words but words made flesh, and that make us look more like Jesus. It helps others see him, and it helps us know him better, too. And that's the best thing of all.