

Six Marks of Discipleship: “Nurturing Relationships”
5 March 2008
Luke 5.17-26
“Holding Hands”

This sermon was preached by Pastor Ned Lenhart at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Two children were playing on the beach, building this elaborate sand castle. It was complete with gates, towers, moats, internal passages. Just as they were about to finish their project, a big wave came along and knocked the castle down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who was watching this whole enterprise said that he expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to their hard work. But that’s not what happened at all. Instead, they ran down the shore, holding hands...laughing, & before long they were sitting down and building another castle.

Reflecting on what he saw, Kushner says, ‘I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Sooner or later, a wave will come along and knock down all that we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only one thing will remain. Only our relationships to other people will endure. And only the person whose hand is held by another, will be able to laugh.’

That...is an observation that would not be lost on the bed-riding man of our Bible reading today.

Luke tells the story of how one day while Jesus was teaching, some men brought a paralyzed friend of theirs for him to heal. There were big crowds & no way to get close

enough to Jesus, so they came up with a strategy: the friends carried him up to the roof – bed & all – removed the tiles from the rafters, then gently laid him before the Lord where he is healed.

Reflecting on this passage and its implication for spiritual friendships, Martin Luther wrote this,

“No one should ever be alone when opposing Satan. The church was invented so that hands could be joined together and one could help another; because if the prayer of one doesn’t help, the prayer of other will.”

Luther’s point: our faith is multiplied...our faith increases exponentially...when joined with the faith of Christian friends. God’s power and God’s ability to work through us in the world becomes greater, when our prayers....& our hands....are joined with those of other Christians.

Have you ever felt it? Experienced that phenomenon? The overwhelming power of the joined together, connected community of faith? Of course you have! Tonight, I witnessed it in action right here at Trinity between supper in the Trinity room and our gathering in the Worship Center for this service.

- Walking down the halls & peeking in the classrooms. What do you see? Kids laughing & giggling...teachers patiently leading students through a bible lesson...paste & scissors & construction paper coming together for a craft? Yes – that is what you’ll see. But look at that same scene with the eyes of faith...through the lens of nurturing relationships and you will witness this: little brothers & sisters in the body of Christ, sharing their faith...their hopes & dreams...their strengths & vulnerabilities...learning week by week how to trust God & one another...nurturing relationships!

- What did you see as you walked in the door tonight on the tables? Enough glue & fabric & light switches & wire to make you think we were either having a thrift sale or that someone is starting a hardware store. But look at that same scene with the eyes of faith...through the lens of nurturing relationships and this is what you'll see: a whole body of Christ that is joining hands & hearts & prayers to help change for the better, the lives of brothers & sisters most of us will never visit in a country many of us will never see.
Nurturing relationships!

I know you could tell your own story of how during difficult times...times when you or someone you loved...cared about...confronted pain & loss...& evil. And how it happened (maybe when you least expected it) how you witnessed the body of Christ come together to create overwhelming support & concern.

I'll never forget the very first nursing home visit I had with Elmer. The nurse directed me to his room where I found two old men sitting side by side, holding hands. One had no legs & was in a wheelchair (that turned out to be Elmer), the other had a cane in one hand & an Ole & Lena joke book on his lap – and he was reading jokes to Elmer, one after another. I asked the guy with the joke book, “Are you a resident here?” “Oh no,” he replied. “Used to come here every day to visit my wife. She passed about a year ago. But while I was visiting my wife, Elmer & I got to be good friends, so now I come every week and torture him with Ole & Lena. And they both let out this long, loud, deep laugh.

I don't remember if I ever opened my communion kit that day...or my bible. All I remember is sitting there and laughing with these guys...over an hour...stupid jokes.

Remember what Jesus said to the paralyzed man who was dropped in his lap that day? Remember his first words as he knelt at his beside & looked into his eyes? He said, *“Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”*

Seeing this man...seeing his faith...seeing the faith of his friends, Jesus says, *“Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”* And then heals him.

Because...Jesus knew what he REALLY needed. Of course he needed legs that worked – but beyond that, he needed relationships that worked. Relationships with his brothers & sisters, to be sure. But most important of all, a relationship with God that worked. And only Jesus could give him that. Only Jesus could give him the gift of a healed & whole relationship with God. So that when his legs stopped working for the final time, along with the body they supported...he might still have hope.

Martin Luther was right – no one should have to face the challenges & evils of the world by themselves. No one should have to face the waves of peril the world throws at us...alone. When things get tough, our friendships with one another in the body of Christ are God’s way of reminding us that regardless of what happens, there will always be someone there holding our hand...assuring us of God’s presence & love...& helping us once again...to laugh. Amen