

## **“BEING AWARE OF GOD . . . LIVING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS”**

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017

Text: 1 Peter 2:19

What if those hands up there on the wall are not our hands--but the hands of others?

I have asked you for several weeks to identify with the beggars in our gospel readings. To fit yourself into Martin Luther’s statement “We are beggars; this is true.”

It may not have been a good fit. You probably do not think of yourself as a beggar. Beggars are other people. Even though Jesus himself appeared among us as a beggar, according to Luke 8:3 and elsewhere, dependent upon the charity of Galilean women like Joanna and Susanna “who provided for them out of their resources.”

Of course, my point was that vis-à-vis God you and I are never in any position other than that of beggars. Ideally, Christians are like the returned prodigal son who says to his loving father, “Please, may I stay with you?”

We are “lucky beggars” because our faith in God’s goodness is not misplaced. Truly, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So, although we are beggars, we are neither impertinent nor afraid. The Lord is our shepherd. He will lead us beside still waters and make sure we have clean water and so on. We fear no evil.

But, of course, when I look at all those hands up there, the hands of beggars, only one pair of those is mine; only one pair is yours. The others are the hands of others. And they are being held out to you and me as though asking for something. Their emptiness begs us to fill them. They are similar to the hands of beggars asking for money or bread or drink.

Symbolically, those hands are people asking us to be Christians.

They are asking us to act like Jesus.

They are asking us to share.

Those hands may even remind us of the early Christians we read about in Acts 2. After the day of Pentecost, when the number of Christians had grown quite large, Luke tells us that “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

Why did they do that? Not because it was a new rule—as though in order to be a Christian you had to do that. Rather, because they “were in awe.” They are amazed, for the signs and wonders Jesus had done had not come to an end, as they expected they would when he was crucified. The spirit of Jesus continued active within his church, among those who believed in him. Jesus kept caring for others.

This is the fruit of Easter: that Jesus Christ is still alive. He is risen and has ascended, but he is no less present among us than he was in the year 30. In fact, he is more present than he was that year, when he was tied to one locality. Back then, he simply couldn’t be in Bethany where Lazarus was dying 60 miles away, because he was in Galilee where other people needed his help. But now, his rule and the benefit of his presence are extended through his Spirit present in all who believe in him.

The early community of believers in Jerusalem shared unstintingly with one another because they all had a wonderful mixture of faith and resources and needs. It was a sort of “Garden of Eden”

situation, where people spent a lot of time together at the temple, but also “breaking bread” (i.e., having communion) in their homes, and their hearts were glad and generous. They praised God, and whatever they did seemed to earn them the goodwill of all the people. What a happy community. What a blessed congregation.

“Glad and generous hearts!” “Spent much time together.” “Praising God.” “Having the goodwill of all the people.”

You see, Luther’s “closing statement” that I have been quoting for two months was only part of the picture. “We are beggars; this is true” indeed. *Coram deo*, before God. *Coram hominibus*, in the eyes of the world, we are not mere beggars. We are givers. That is also true. We serve. We wait on others.

Our faith in God because of the risen Christ is accompanied by love for one another, and for all.

That is because, as sheep, we have a particular notion about our shepherd Lord. As people who are “aware of God,” to quote from 1 Peter 2:19, “being aware of God,” we are not afraid to put ourselves in service to others. Serving others, helping others, giving to others is costly to ourselves. But we are prepared for that because of our peculiar awareness of God.

We are not just “aware” that God places demands upon us and expects us to meet them or suffer consequences. We are not merely aware that God has created all things.

As a community, our “awareness” of God includes this: that, because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we cannot be separated from the love of God. As Peter says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.”

“Being aware of God” and “living for righteousness.” Good bumper sticker phrases, aren’t they? But if you’re going to put a bumper sticker on your car to

tell people you’re a Christian, you need both of them. One of them won’t do the job.

Because when Martin Luther wrote on a scrap of paper “Wir sind Bettler; hoc est verum,” “We are beggars; this is true,” he was not telling the whole truth. Yes, “We are beggars” tells the whole truth about our relationship with God. Every single thing we receive, beginning with life itself, is a free gift from God. Every breath, every move, everything we call “good,” we receive from the gracious and almighty God, our Father in heaven above.

But the picture is not complete, and was not even for Martin Luther, when we talk about our relationship with God. Our restoration to the kingdom, our reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, changes our relationship with other people. In those relationships, we become givers—like the early Christians in Acts 2. “We are givers; this is true” is how you could put it. Or “We are servants; this is true.” “Servants of all, subject to everyone,” to use Martin Luther’s precise words.

When Thomas and the other disciples saw the hands of Jesus with the stigmata of love, the signs of his gracious giving of himself for us, his bearing our sins on the cross, Thomas and the other disciples were transformed into believers and lovers. They were beggars, that was true. But they left that room (where they had seen Jesus) no longer afraid everyone in Jerusalem would kill them, but eager to share the joy and peace they had found through believing in the Risen Lord. “I believe, help my unbelief” they had prayed. But their was another petition now: “I love others; help me love others even better.”

“Being aware of God,” as we are—aware of his creative goodness, his patient redemption of the world, his sending of his own Spirit to live in us—“Being aware of God,” we “live for righteousness.” No longer living for ourselves, we give our whole lives to God as an offering by bearing one another’s burdens, forgiving one another, caring for one

another, and thus extending the peace of God to the whole world God loves.

This is agenda enough for any congregation, for our hearts and for our hands: That we, “being aware of God” because we have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from our ancestors” “through the precious blood of Christ” who is risen from the dead, may “live for righteousness,” “loving one another deeply from the heart.”

Amen.

