

So here it is, the Sunday before July 4th.

And I am not where I expected to be.

Actually, it's bigger than that.

I am not where I have **ever** been on the Sunday before July 4th.

In my 31 years of being a pastor here,

I have never stood in this pulpit on this particular Sunday.

Since 1989, on this particular Sunday, every year,

I have woken up on a slightly uncomfortable mattress

surrounded by dozens, now hundreds,

of teens and adults – on the first full day of our Appalachia Service Project trip.

The day before, we'd all traveled south in buses and vans,

packed to the gills with sleeping bags and tools and work clothes.

We rolled into the parking lot of Roanoke College sometime early evening, and taken over a bunch of their dorms.

We've spent Saturday night staying up too late

because the excitement is running so high.

And now it's Sunday morning.

We bang on all the dorm doors to wake the kids up,
and slowly and sleepily they all make their way outside.

It's time for morning worship.

And it's time for me to preach --

not from a pulpit, but out in the sunshine,

to a great multitude of people on their way to do God's work

in the towns and hollers of West Virginia.

This is where I have always been

on the Sunday before the Fourth of July.

This is where a great many of us have always been.

There's a tradition that we have in that morning worship.

After I've preached, after we've prayed together,

it's time for the blessing of the hands.

We have three large basins of water,

and at each basin stands one of the adults helping to lead the trip,

the amazing team of leaders, some of whom have given twenty or more

summers to ASP.

And one by one, we come forward, each of us,

and we hold our hands out,
and, like a baptism, the water is poured on our hands,
and these words are said:

“may your hands be blessed for service”

“May God use these hands for love.”

May these hands do the work of compassion.

And then we head out, all of us,
piled into vans. We drive into the heart of West Virginia,
into towns like Rainelle and Hinton,
Craigsville and Man.

And those hands, those hands that were blessed?

They do amazing work.

Those hands fix roofs.

Those hands put up siding.

Those hands install insulation.

Those hands dig drainage ditches.

That's not all.

Those hands are used for embracing,

for hugging a child,

for holding on tight in love newly found, in friendship newly formed.

So now you've had a little glimpse

of where I would usually be on this Sunday,

during this week.

Where a whole bunch of us were going to be.

Covid-19 forced the Appalachia Service Project

to suspend its home repair ministry for this summer,

the first time in fifty years –

there was just no way to bring thousands of high school youth

on crowded buses and vans

into little towns in Appalachia

into houses with grandparents and little kids.

Those are the houses where our hands would have been at work,

fixing and building, mending and patching,

digging and sawing and hammering.

And it breaks our hearts not to be there.

So what will our hands be doing instead?

What will we do with our hearts so full of love?

Well, we're not sitting around this week moping.

We're calling this our Plan B ASP week.

And here's what our hands will do instead.

We'll use our hands to write letters of to the families we worked for last year.

We'll use our hands to pack up packages for those families, filling boxes with treats to let them know they're loved.

We'll clasp our hands together in prayer,

as we remember before God the needs of the families of Appalachia.

We'll use our hands to bag up groceries for the food pantries right here in our community, because the need is so great here and now.

And – we're still going to saw and hammer and drill, too –

there's a pile of pressure-treated lumber by the Youth Barn right now that we're going to turn into garden benches,

to sell and raise some money for ASP.

Wish us luck – we’ve built a lot of things over the years,
but we haven’t tried benches before.

So our hands will still be doing the work of love.

Just – in a different way.

There’s a beautiful prayer that we also always share on this first Sunday of
our Appalachia week.

After our hands have been blessed for service,
our hands still damp from the water that we’ve made holy,
we join our voices together in the prayer of St. Teresa.

And it goes like this:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.”

Christ has no hands on earth but yours.

Our hands are his hands.

Our hands are his hands.

This past week, in the midday devotions that I've been leading on Zoom, we read stories of miracle, Jesus' miracles.

In one story, Jesus took bread in his hands and blessed it and broke it and it became enough to feed five thousand people.

In another story, Jesus placed his hands on the shoulders of a woman who'd been crippled for decades, and with the touch of his hands she stood straight.

And in another, Jesus reached out his hand to his friend Peter, who was drowning in the waves, and with his touch made Peter walk on water.

So if our hands now are Jesus' hands on earth, then our hands must also be hands of miracle, right?

If Jesus' hands are now our hands, then **our** hands must also be used for healing.

Our hands must also be used to create abundance.

Our hands must be used to reach out to those who are drowning and help them up again.

All of us who were supposed to go on the Appalachia trip will be using our hands differently this week.

But they will still be the hands of Christ.

We will still be using them for healing.

We will be using them for abundance.

We will be using them to reach out and to help.

Let's face it, all of us would-be ASPers are not the only ones who are not where we thought we'd be this week.

Or last week, or the weeks ahead.

And maybe we're not using our hands, our hearts, our lives in quite the same way we thought we'd be doing.

But we can still be at work.

Our hands are still the hands that Christ is working through.

Christ has no other hands but ours,
to build a kingdom of love,
to build a world of peace.

So put your hands to work,
here and now in our new reality.

Pack up a bag of groceries,
pick up the phone to call someone,
write a letter to make a difference, make a sign for all to see,
put your hands together in prayer.

Let the world be blessed by the work of your hands,
just as your hands have been blessed by the Creator who formed you.

For Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks out in compassion

Yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now. Amen.

