

Helping Hands

Acts 16:9-15; John 5:1-9; Psalm 67; 5-13-07

I usually drive back to Wisconsin once each year. I shouldn't say, "I drive back." My daughters have decided it is not a good thing to have me out there on the highways and byways driving the 1100 miles on my own. They know I have a habit of not stopping for anything but gas and it makes them very nervous to think I will attempt the 16 hours or so at one fell swoop. So, in order to control mother a bit, a day or so before we start out, a pair of helping hands arrives at Bradley in the person of my youngest daughter, Megan. She ensures that I will stop for one night and that the drive around or through Chicago is completed without incident. I am grateful for the help and for the time we can spend together discussing everything. I like to think I further her education by playing CDs by artists she considers at least a little antique and she gives me a refreshing slant on life offering her opinions on any subject I bring up. It is a very good time.

In the book of Acts we encounter Paul on one of his missionary journeys. He had three of these times of travel, we are told. He usually had a few companions with him to keep him going through all the problems he encountered including shipwrecks and periods of time in jail. The person mentioned as a fellow traveler in this reading is Timothy, a most frequent companion. He was Paul's set of helping hands as Paul went about spreading the good news of Christ, as he knew and understood it, and planted the seeds for small churches around the Mediterranean.

There are times we picture Paul as single handedly ensuring the spread of Christianity and the future of the church. But there were many who helped him. Several mentioned in the Bible are wealthy women he would encounter from time to time, who were captured by his message and who wanted to help. Lydia is mentioned here.

Women were very important in the establishment of the early church. They embraced the message of Christ and worked to help it take root and grow. Often they did this after messengers, such as Paul, had happened by. In effect, they mothered the infant churches. Very often they had money and they could sustain the work of the disciples and apostles materially. But, they also had a great deal of enthusiasm and, through reaching out and helping others see the light of the new way, they helped the movement grow and flourish. As we learn from some of Paul's letters, they must have had considerable influence, enough to cause concern in some of the churches. But, in spite of the controversy they might have stirred up from time to time, much is owed them for all the work they did. Paul was wise in using the women who were willing to help him.

We can have no doubt that Jesus offered helping hands to many people of the past and in the present. In the gospel of John we see him encouraging a man back into life, who had not been able to do much of anything. Jesus asks him if he wants to be made well. When the man answers in the affirmative, Jesus tells him to "take up his bed and walk." The man does. We can view this either as a healing or as a time when Jesus acquainted someone with his motives and then told him his future was in his own hands. It was time he stopped using excuses to remain lame and it was time for him to do something about it. It was time for him to get up and embrace life.

We all encounter people who complain a lot about life and the hand it has dealt them. They come to us seeking advice and a pathway in life. While we may offer guidance, we often discover that they do little about their state in life, and stay right in their comfortable little place, lying right next to that pool in Bethzatha. They ask us to reach out with helping hands but

believe that it is too difficult to pick up their own beds, their own sources of discontent, and walk forward, discovering new solutions to their own problems.

Opening doors in minds is one of the greatest things we can do for others. Helping them see there is another way of handling life that leads them into more fullness can be very rewarding. However, everyone is pretty content with the status quo and it is frightening to consider that we must grow up and take responsibility for our lives. Telling anyone to stop whining and look for answers is touchy. But to be good stewards of God's love and guidance, we must find ways to do this to help those who suffer and stagnate all around us.

Good parents in general and mothers in specific do this. They help us find our way in life. They raise us to set us free and help us understand that we make choices that determine our lives for better or for worse. They realize, however, that there is a time when we need to fly off on our own and apply all the things they have taught us to live our lives without their continual help. When parents continually interfere in their children's lives they rob them of their independence and keep them from picking up their own beds and walking with certainty into the future. Sometimes mothers and fathers are too sheltering, too protective. When they guard us beyond the stage in life they should, they need to step back and examine their own motives for keeping us tied to them emotionally and in other ways. They need to ask why it is they are putting their own needs ahead of their kids and keeping them from growing up. I will always remember my oldest daughter reminding me that it was fine to share experiences with her but she had to make her own mistakes. She knew better than I did that life was waiting for her and that she needed to make it her own. A helping hand was allowed and appreciated from time to time but not too often.

On this Mother's Day, when we stop to reflect on those who have mothered us in life, we need to consider all the strengths they gave us, sometimes in spite of ourselves. We need to remember, when we find ourselves stuck in life, the voices that said to us "take up your bed and walk" or "suck it up, Buttercup and get on with it." We need to remember them as helping hands that formed us into the wonderful children of God we are today. -- Amen