

"God's work. Our hands" (11Sept16)
(Luke 15:1-10)

Welcome to worship, or welcome back to worship, as you've been off working on service projects. Besides this reflection, though, those projects may in themselves be worship.

To think faithfully about what constitutes worship, a frame might be in German terminology, where this gathering is known as *Gottesdienst*. It's a fun almost play on words (if ever before the *sprechen* of *Deutsch* has been referred to as "fun"). *Gottesdienst* is literally translated as "God-service." The play on words is in the tension of whether we are serving God or God is serving us. (In typical faithful paradox, the answer is probably "both!" A similar tension exists in the Old English origins of our word "worship," which was fully "worthy-ship." Our usual sense of worshipping God is that we offer praise, but this is also the venue for God making us worthy.)

With the *Gottesdienst* or God-service version as a good frame for this morning's various projects, the play on words gets complicated when we add some pronouns and prepositions into the mix. It's not just a matter of God serving us or of our service to God. It is also God serving "them" (to choose a broadly generic third person pronoun), and—still a notch more for playing with the words—it is God serving them through us, plus we serve others for Christ's sake.

In another twist amid this already complex mix, as we understand God with us and embodied in us, we're left with the question of where to identify Christ's presence. With the "what would Jesus do" sense and when we describe behavior as Christ-like, we say that when we do good things, we are acting like Jesus. But also central to our faithful understanding is that what we do, we do to Jesus, in the "as you did it to the least of my

sisters and brothers, you did it to me" verse (Mt25:40). There, Jesus may identify himself even more closely with those who need help than with those helping. In the upcoming Bible reading, then, God may be identified both with lost and finder, and we may equally be shepherds for God or sheep needing to be found.

One final bit of ambiguity to throw at you. I really appreciate the phrase, "God's work, our hands." It is the ELCA's motto, the catchphrase of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and it's a good one. But just like the good UCC motto of "God is still speaking," it leaves ambiguity. Not everything we say is God's speech, and not all that our hands do belongs to God. So what does? We might claim our projects today as godly—in quilts and advocacy and tending creation and all. What about what else you've done this morning, in getting your family ready and preparing breakfast and driving on streets and singing hymns and greeting others and even breathing? How do we see these more as God's work for or through your hands? How can we consider all these layers of reality of your life and God's more fully intertwined?

The breadth of the question is indicated in a poem I'd like to share. In spite of "God's work, our hands" being a phrase claimed by modern Lutherans, this 550-year old poem is by a Spanish Catholic mystic, Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he
walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he
blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

Christ has no body now but yours