

Advent Lutheran Church
God's Work. Our Hands. Every Day.
September 8, 2024
I Corinthians 12:1, 4-12, 25-27 (Message)
Matthew 25:31-40

37 years ago a woman did what many here have done multiple times in their lives: she said yes when invited to be part of a church retreat. Little did she know, her decision would change not only her life, but the lives of many in her community.

The woman I'm remembering is Donagene Christian. While on this retreat with Central Lutheran Church – one of our ELCA congregations in East Dallas – God placed it on her heart that she was to feed her community. This vision was so compelling that she had to act.

Rather than becoming discouraged when her own church decided this idea was too big for them, she sought out support from other churches. And, rather than focus on a denomination, she focused on her geography.

Ultimately, she convinced 13 churches of differing sizes and theological perspectives to come together to form a new non-profit focused on feeding food insecure folks in East Dallas.

Over the years that ministry grew from serving 1 zip code to 5 and relocated from the basement of a church to its own 16,000 square foot facility. It also grew from feeding people to feeding, clothing, and empowering them.

This year, White Rock Center of Hope will help more than 7,000 neighbors in need by providing more than 800,000 pounds of food, more than 75,000 articles of clothing, and more than \$100,000 in rental assistance. And, more than 300 people will participate in empowerment programs.

All of this is made possible by more than 1,000 volunteers most of whom get involved through their local churches.

Much more recently – just 11 years ago, the ELCA launched God’s Work Our Hands Sunday. It actually started in 2013 in connection with the ELCA's 25th anniversary. And, over the years, it has become one of the denomination’s most visible activities nationwide.

This weekend the vast majority of the more than 8,000 congregations in the ELCA are loving their neighbors by serving their communities. Millions of Lutherans are living out their faith through hands-on service projects – and many are doing so while dressed in their yellow tee shirts.

Here at Advent, we’ve stretched God’s Work Our Hands out beyond a day or even a weekend. While some of our projects have taken place many more are happening later today and over the next several weeks.

Some of this year’s projects include activities here on our church campus while others happen throughout the community. Our labors of love benefit

- Arlington Life Shelter
- Dalworthington Gardens Police and Fire
- Green Oaks School
- Lutheran World Relief
- Nursing Homes

Additionally, we have several projects for Advent happening here at Advent - starting with one that is great if you happen to be motivated to serve right after church -

- CGC move in (see Greta following worship for your assignment)
- Lord’s Pantry
- And a church property cleanup day

Last but not least, one project connected Advent with the ministry I serve – White Rock Center of Hope. Yesterday, several of you helped feed more than 1,100 food insecure folks.

Clearly you all get the concept of God's Work Our Hands. And while it is somewhat easy to fit an extra activity in to your schedule for this annual event, it is important to be reminded that God's Work Our Hands should be the way we live out our faith every day.

Earlier this week several folks gathered with me for a roundtable discussion on risk taking mission and service. We started by sharing stories of times that each of us had served in ways that took us well beyond our comfort zone. One participant shared how an Advent mission trip to Mexico stretched him while another reflected on his experience with an under the bridge ministry with unhoused folks.

Our roundtable group learned that Bishop Schnase, the author of the book that inspired this sermon series, was very intentional in choosing the words risk taking to modify mission and service. He writes:

Risk-taking steps into greater uncertainty, a higher possibility of discomfort, resistance, or sacrifice. Risk-Taking Mission and Service takes people into ministries that push them out of their comfort zone, stretching them beyond the circle of relationships and practices that routinely define their faith communities.¹

Risk taking means that some of what we try won't be easy and some of it won't work as we hope.

Risk taking means that we are open to finding ways to say "yes" when ideas align with our mission, vision, and values even and perhaps especially when we've never done anything quite like that before.

Risk taking means that we expect God raises up new leaders and that some of them may be the people we least expect.

Advent will turn 50 soon. There is so much about our ministry we can and should give thanks for. Today, I'm thinking about risk

¹ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised* (Abingdon Press, 2018), p.113.

taking mission and service – activities designed for people who are not yet and some of whom may never be part of our congregation.

- Think about all of the risk-takers who were involved in launching Adviento.
- Consider the risk-takers who started outreach ministries that were effective for a season, but no longer exist.
- Remember the many risk-takers who stepped up to birth the Lord's Pantry and to continue it during a pandemic.

And, now, look within. This morning's Epistle lesson offered the familiar story comparing the roles each of us have in the body of Christ to the parts within a human body. In both systems, all parts are needed. And, the system only functions well when each part stays true to its identity.

Which part are you?

- Nose
- Elbow
- Big toe
- Heart
- Eye lid?

Thankfully there isn't an official Lutheran list that matches spiritual gifts to physical body parts. So, you are safe with whichever part you chose.

However, the same isn't true when it comes to the many gifts God has given you. Do you know what they are? Are you committed to using them to love God by loving your neighbor?

I wonder how Advent would change if every person here knew their giftedness and sought out ways to share it here in this community of faith. I wonder how their lives would change if they felt encouraged and empowered to share feely. And, I wonder if next week's Day of Discovery might provide an opportunity for us to begin to figure this all out together. Amen.