

25th Anniversary in the Ministry Sermon

Text: Psalm 90:17

May the favor of the Lord rest upon us; establish the world of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.

Theme: God Can even Use Hands Like These

I must admit that all of you can keep a secret well. I had absolutely no idea last week of your plot to take over the service and celebrate my 25th year in the ministry. The best part of the plot were when my wife and son were in the basement to find pictures, and I wondered what they were doing down there. I went down, chatted with them, and even worked on a puzzle for a while (which is something that I hate to do.) They kept texting each other, “When is he going to leave.” I want to thank you for the dinner and your many cards and gifts. Soon I will have a new alb from those gifts.

Today it’s my turn to talk. As I did on the occasion of my 10th anniversary in the ministry, I would like to share some thoughts of what I have learned over these 25 years. (I was told that this would be a short sermon.) Something caught my attention last week, and I alluded to it in my remarks. In the Recognition, Pastor Wangerin read Psalm 90, which ends, “*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands.*” Today, I would like to look at how God can even use hands like these.

I. This verse is one that was often used in the early history of our synod.

CFW Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, often used this verse in his sermons. He began his sermon to the fifth convention of the synod with this verse. He said in the introduction that it is a wondrous thing that God calls even calls us, who are dust, to help in His work of bringing the Gospel into the world. He also began his remarks for the dedication of Concordia Publishing House with this verse. One of Walther’s closest friends was Dr. George Stoeckardt. In a mission sermon which has greatly influenced my ministry Stoeckhardt said, “**Precious souls, which the Lord has inscribed in his hand before the foundation of the world, whose salvation he has taken into his hand, unto whom he has given the solemn assurance that no one will tear them out of his hand, them has he entrusted into our weak, trembling hands, has honored us by having us lead his possession, deliver to him what is his.**” He ended that sermon with these words, “**And the Lord our God, may he be kind to us and continue to promote the labor of our hands among us. Yes, the work of our hands, may he accomplish it!**” When Walther died, the president of the synod at the time, “HC Schwan used this psalm as the funeral text. He ended the sermon with these words, “**My brothers, if we trust Him in this, according to His word, then the Lord our God will also be gracious to us and prosper the work of our hands among us. Yes, He will prosper the work of our hands.**”¹

¹*At Home in the House of My Fathers*, page 540.

II. But God doesn't need the work of our hands.

He can accomplish the salvation of His people without any of our efforts. Moses wrote this psalm. He witnessed many times when God saved His people without any help from the people at all. Think of the Passover or how God saved His people at the Red Sea. The people did nothing God did it all. God often reminded the people how He saved them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

The same is especially true with regard to our salvation through Jesus Christ. We consider the hands of our Lord. They were nailed to a cross. It was there where He bore the penalty for all of our sins. He paid the entire price. He gave His life for the forgiveness of our sins. There is nothing that we can add. We simply trust that He is our Savior. He has reconciled us back to God. Through faith in Him we are reborn to a new life in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. On the last day He will raise all of His people to eternal life with Him in heaven. There is nothing that we can do to save ourselves because Jesus has done it all.

Our hands are so weak and trembling. As Christians we often wonder how we can serve the Lord. How could he accomplish any good through me?

I would like to share a couple of personal reflections. When I was younger, I was encouraged by several people to consider the ministry, and I felt that God was leading me this way. But I had a big issue, which I still occasionally struggle with, I stuttered. It only got worse when I was in college. There were times when I had to sing to get the words out. I wondered how I would ever preach, if I couldn't even talk. My stuttering was the worst it ever was the evening before I preached my first sermon. I wondered how I would ever be able to do a service. By God's grace, I didn't stutter at all. I do remember that I talked so fast that the service was only ½ hour. To this day I am often reminded that God didn't call me because I am a great speaker. I also think back at the beginning of my ministry and how God sent a fledgling American pastor and his young German wife to a country that was new to both of us, Canada. Then God brought us to Milwaukee. We have seen a lot of changes in our congregation in the last 17 years. I remember looking at the demographics of the area when I came and thought that we will never be doing Asian ministry. Only about 2% of the population of the area was Asian at the time. Today we have a Hmong pastor. I would have considered myself completely unprepared for ethnic ministry. Yet, how God has blessed us. God often has that way of surprising us. We think that we would like God to use us in certain ways, and he uses us in ways that we never expected.

As Stoeckhardt wrote in that sermon our hands are weak and trembling. We have so many weaknesses. We have failed in so many ways. We wonder how God could ever use us in His service. As we get older we are not able to do some of the things that we could do in the past, and we feel useless.

III. Yet, He does blessed the work of our hands.

Moses told God that he wasn't cut out for the job because he stuttered. Yet, look at how God used him. Think of the disciples. They were often like the Keystone Cops. Paul was a persecutor of the church. Yet, they became the foundation of the church. I look back at my ministry. I know that I am

not the wisest, most eloquent, and definitely not the most artistic pastor. Yet, I am astounded at how God as even been able to use me in His service. It's like that for all of us as Christians. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth... But God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things...., so that no one may boast before Him.*" God never chooses us because we are indispensable to Him. If we think that we are, He shows that He doesn't need us. He uses us in ways that we thought that He never could, to show that it is all by His grace and power. No matter what God has in store for me as a pastor, no matter what He has in store for this congregation, and no matter what He has in store for you personally as His servant, we know that He will bless the work of our hands. He has called us into His service, and He will bless our service in His name.

Think of those hands of our Savior with their wounds and how much He loved you to redeem you from your sins. He has called you into His service. I know that He will bless all that you do in His name if you see it or not. May He give us all much joy as we serve in the name of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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