

The theme of the American Baptist Biennial meeting in Pasadena and the Evergreen Annual Meeting in Mountlake Terrace was: These hands...these feet. The implication was and is that we (you and I) serve as the hands and feet, the eyes and ears of Christ in our world today. In some ways Elijah's mantle has fallen on our shoulders and we now take up and extend the ministry of Christ to the world. This is the call or task of the church, the followers of Christ – it is not an option that we add on should we want to—it is the ministry to which we have been called: to be the hands and feet of Christ. How we do this is the question.

“Do you want to be well?” Or, if I could paraphrase it, “What options have you examined?” The man in our passage is looking for hope. It is his daily task to watch the waters in hopes that they are stirred and in hope that he can be the first one into the stirred waters. The pool is surrounded by hundreds of others doing the same thing. The blind, the paralyzed, the lame are there with only one option – the stirring of the water (it was believed that from time to time an angel came down and stirred the waters and the first one in the water after such an event would be healed). They have no other option in their lives. Their days are spent in the hope that the water is stirred and they are first.

Now Jesus asks, *“Do you want to be well?”* He is wondering if the man is prepared for what would happen if he is healed after 38 years as in invalid. His days will no longer be spent waiting but in working for his daily bread. Jesus is asking him if he is ready for the results of his life being radically transformed. The man's response is, “Yes, but...” Yes, I want to be healed but I have no one to help me. Do we understand how tragic and sad those words are? There is no one who will stand or sit beside this man and wait. Regardless of how hard he tries there is no way he will win the race to the water. “I have no one.”

There are several ways I have thought of going with this man and his response. Should we examine the lack of responsibility of those around this man who could have helped him? Should we look at what has happened in society to make this this man's only hope? If we are the hands and feet of Christ, what should our response be? Or are these the right questions at all?

Jesus comes up with a different option: An option that the man would probably never have thought of (not sure what he expected from Jesus, if anything. He doesn't know who Jesus is – just a man walking through the crowds, engaging him in conversation). But Jesus simply responds, *“Stand up and walk.”* Now the decision is back on the man. What does he do now? Does he extend his hand to Jesus and have Jesus help him to his feet? Does he begin a long history of his illness, the doctors he has seen and how helpless his condition is? Does he simply remain where he is? He is an invalid – it has been 38 years.

His decision is made. He stands up, picks up his mat and walks away. Now there is one problem. It is the Sabbath day and carrying a mat is seen as work. The waters have not been stirred. There has been no rushing of people to get in—no miracle has happened today. Suddenly this man is walking and carrying his mat.

Who is responsible for this? He does not know – Jesus has left. Jesus had presented him with another option to the hopelessness of his situation and he has taken it.

His plan was, “*Sir, I have no one to help me.*” In his thinking this was his only option. Jesus has given him a different one – “stand up and walk.” Jesus has told him not to wait for the “traditional” option – it may never come – but to look outside the box – see if there is another way. To stay inside the box Jesus would have had to find someone to come and sit with him and hope that together they could get him to the water first (there are times when that is what may be needed). Jesus could have walked away, shrugged his shoulders and commented to his disciples that it is too bad that this man’s family and society has neglected him, etc. He does none of these. He simply offers a new option—have you tried this?

We are the hands and feet, the eyes and ears of Christ. We have a good history as American Baptists of being Christ’s hands and feet. Our mission’s vision is to come in and walk beside and work ourselves out of a job. We have continually trained people to do the job of being the hands and feet of Christ in the place and culture where they live. We have not just come to meet the immediate needs but have sought ways of looking beyond the immediate to the future (what we are doing in Haiti today). We are continually seeking options and looking for new ways to do things. What if? We are being the hands and feet of Christ.

Jesus is offering a new option. The question is whether or not the man is open to new possibilities. The question is whether or not we are open to new possibilities. Our Evergreen Association is offering us that possibility. We are being asked to consider whether we want to become a part of an Evergreen Missional Church Learning Team. (May 16 at Fremont Baptist – 5 p.m.) Now my first thought when I heard about this was “not another denomination program to fill our hours with more meetings.” Then I discovered that this is an opportunity for us to be challenged to possible new options for ministry and outreach. It is four sessions spread out over a year – It is not an inward looking program but one that pushes us along with other congregations to look beyond where we are now – “*Do you want to be well?*”

Again, my thoughts were, “We are deeply involved in doing Wings to Reading. How can we take on any more?” But then, what if... what if part of our involvement is to use Wings as a teaching/learning model for other congregations? What if part of our call to be the hands and feet of Christ is to train others to do a reading program or use the basic foundation of it for outreach? One congregation I have heard of is doing Wings but it is a cooking program – teaching young moms how to cook nutritionally. Or, what if Jesus has another option? Unless we go and listen and become involved how will we know? To change the world we must be willing to be open to new possibilities, to new options of healing.

What are those possible new possibilities? I don’t know. If I did they wouldn’t be new. But our God does. Maybe there are other ways to be healed? Are you ready for something new? It may be that in working together with other congregations we will discover a new way, a new ministry, and in the process we become again the hands and feet of Christ. We become the Church.

Bruce Chittick used this definition of the Church in his ordination paper yesterday:

The church is visible in local faith community gatherings, each called to live out their faith as they feel called in their specific place, time and setting. The church is also the entire body of followers of Christ, called to be Christ in the world today, a world desperately in need of good news. It is good news that Christ has brought us together, given us the ability to understand, and empowered us to share ministry in a myriad of ways. The church is a community that gathers but is ultimately sent. The church is a community that hears with the ears of their heart so that it might act with its hands and feet. With Christ as our head, the body—the church—continues to bring about the good news.

The question is, “Do you want to be well?” Do we give an excuse, “Sir, I have no one to help me.” (We don’t have the resources. We don’t have the expertise. We don’t have the people. We have no one to help us.) -- to this Jesus comes with a new option – Stand up and walk – No idea what will happen. It may be difficult. We may stumble in the process. We may fail now and then. There will be those who question what we are doing...but we will be standing tall and we will be the hands and feet, the eyes and ears of the Christ.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Chittick, Bruce, Ordination Paper, May 8, 2010 (Seattle, First Baptist Church)