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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
September 1, 2013
Psalm 90

“Prosper the Work of Our Hands”

Take a look at your hands. Go on, put down your bulletins, and take a look at your hands. What have those hands been doing this summer? Have they been digging in the soil, planting flowers, pulling up weeds? Have they been holding books in front of your nose as you lounge around on the beach or at a summer cabin? Have they been clacking away at a computer keyboard, the work not stopping for summer?

This summer, my hands held a newborn baby . . . little Ellis Ludlow. My hands also gripped the paddle of a kayak at Spofford Lake. They held chimes and bells, and they threw a pot at Montreat. Both of those were firsts for me, lots of fun, and I discovered it's harder to ring a bell and throw a pot than it looks. My hands also picked more tomatoes and cucumbers than I could possibly eat, and they picked up knitting needles for the first time in a long time, reminding me how much I missed knitting and how therapeutic it can be.

What have your hands been doing? (responses!)

Today we are honoring the work of the hands of all who labor, and we are celebrating the opportunities that we have to rest our hands, even for just a day. We honor the hands of the assembly line worker, swift and capable. We honor the hands of the teacher, who patiently calls on students who have their hands raised. We honor the hands of the artist, free-flowing and splattered with paint. We honor the hands of the stay-at home-parent, always ready to offer a hug. We honor the hands of the surgeon, so skilled and so precise. We honor your hands today for the work your hands do and we celebrate the rest from their labor that some of your hands have enjoyed during these summer months.

But today I particularly want to talk about people who once worked, but whose hands now circle the want ads; or the people who have happily entered retirement but still worry that their hands will be too idle or even forgotten. I want to talk about the people whose hands are still occupied with work, but are wondering if the work of their hands has been worth their efforts, and I even want to talk about the people who have a nagging sense that the work of their hands is coming to a close.

You see, the work of our hands often determines how others see us and even how we see ourselves. In our heart of hearts, of course, we know that we are much more than our work, but our self esteem can be tightly linked to our jobs. So when our jobs are coming to a close or have come to a close, whether at our own choosing or someone else's, it's natural to look back at our work and wonder if the work of our hands prospered or not. Even the psalmist in today's psalm pleads to God, “prosper for us the work of our hands- O prosper the work of our hands!”

Psalm 90 is the only psalm, the only one, attributed to Moses. This is significant in that Moses was a very significant person who led a very significant life. As the Bible says, never was there another like him.

You know the story of Moses. Moses narrowly escaped with his life as an infant, was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter but was actually raised by his own mother in the Egyptian royal household. He rose through the ranks of government, while becoming increasingly aware of his Hebrew identity. Moses murdered an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave, and escaped into the wilderness where God, in a burning bush, tracked him down and sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom.

It's a great story about plagues and high-level negotiations, a late-night escape, a near disaster at the Red Sea, and then forty years of walking through the wilderness of Sinai: Moses leading, interceding with God, teaching, scolding, prodding, inspiring, and even threatening. It was his life's work. But when he arrives at Mount Nebo, after 40 years of faithful, hard work, God leads Moses up the mountain, shows him the incredible view, and announces that he's not going to get there. Someone else, Joshua, will complete his work and lead the people into the Promised Land.

For years, it struck me as unfair, almost cruel, that God didn't allow Moses to lead the people into the Promised Land. I had a hard time understanding why Moses, after all those years of faithfully serving the Lord, of devoting the work of his hands to the Lord's people, wasn't allowed to step even one foot into the Promised Land.

This struggle has led me to search for the meaning behind the Lord's actions, because surely there is a meaning there. Some people say Moses wasn't allowed into the Promised Land because he committed a crime that was unforgivable; and others say he was being punished for being unfaithful a few chapters and stories back. But I never found either of those explanations very satisfactory, so I kept searching for an answer, until one day it dawned on me, that while Moses was the right person to lead the people to the Promised Land, he wasn't the right one to lead them in the Promised Land. That job was better suited for Joshua than Moses. In other words, just because a person may be a great leader or worker for one task, that doesn't make him or her the right leader or worker for a different task. Different times call for different people, different gifts, and different skills.

I think the reason I had a hard time grasping the meaning behind the story all these years, is because recognizing we're not right the person for the job, is a hard thing to do. We talk all the time in the church about being called; we're called to leadership positions; we're called to follow where God leads us; we're called to get out of the boat and follow Jesus. The Bible is full of call stories. Moses' call story is, in fact, one of the better ones. He doesn't want to go; he comes up with every excuse in the book; but still God calls him to lead the people.

But in so many of the Bible's call stories, there's another story just under the surface, and that's the story of the person who is no longer called.

In the church we do a great job of talking about being called *to* something, but we forget that also someone is being called away from something. And being called away can be painful. It's hard to see how God is at work in the calling away from something.

Sometimes the call away from something or someone is difficult because it means we have to come to the realization that we're no longer the right person for the job, and that is hard to come to terms with, especially when you've given the work of your hands to that job. It can be hard to discern when our gifts and skills are no longer the right gifts and skills for the job. Letting go and moving on is a very difficult thing to do, because we like to believe that if we just work harder and better and longer, everything will work out. But in our heart of hearts we often know when our particular skill sets are no longer the right skill sets, and that it's time to move on; and best to acknowledge it ourselves before someone acknowledges it for us. Because that's really difficult. Being called away from something without our consent is tough and humbling.

You might know there's a new movie out about Steve Jobs. You might also recall that after he died, his commencement speech at Stanford was played over and over. I was struck by something he said about the time he was fired from Apple. Jobs was devastated, didn't know what to do, and felt like a failure. He was rejected; but he had to start over.

He said:

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.

He started a company called NeXT and Pixar, maker of some of the best computer animated movies. He met his wife and, in an odd turn of events, went back to Apple via NeXT.

"I'm pretty sure none of this would have happened if I hadn't been fired from Apple," he said. "It was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it. Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith."

It's hard to see how God is at work when we're called away from something, but God is. In fact, sometimes it's God who is calling us away from something, even when that seems completely unfair and we're devastated by it. But as someone once said, wherever a door is shut, a window is opened. And we can trust God to lead us through the window, even though it's easier and less painful to go through the door.

If you learn nothing else from the story of Moses and the Exodus, learn that God doesn't only call us to something, like a Promised Land, God also calls us away from something, like Egypt. And don't forget that the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt on numerous

occasions, but God kept moving them along, and away from, that life. God called them away from Egypt.

As Christians, we stake our very faith on the idea that being called away from something brings new life. We call this resurrection; Jesus was called away from his earthly life to a new life so that we could have life! We believe that through death, which, by the way, doesn't always mean literal death but can also mean a symbolic death of a career or job of what have you, we actually are called to a new life.

Today the Psalmist cries out, "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper the work for us the work of our hands-O prosper the work of our hands."

So fear not, as the Bible likes to say. Fear not. For Moses' story and psalm, like our stories, is as much about what we are called to as much as it is about what we are called away from, and what we learn in the story is that God can be trusted with our lives and God is at work in our lives in both the calling toward something and the calling away from something.

Amen.