

Sermon for Hands Across Richmond Sunday
St. Stephen's Church
September 30, 2007
The Rev. David T. Anderson

I don't want to talk about the gospel today. I don't want to tell you about it. I want the gospel to come across to, each and all. Because each and all of us are the brothers that Lazarus seeks to warn! Each and all of us need to know the real truth about living and dying right now! Each and all of us need to know the real path of life, life that leads not to torment, but to joy, and a place at the table with Abraham!

I want you and me to be touched by that power that feels like a sure foundation. It is the foundation that saints of ages past and present stand on when their living is "holy." Not pious and superficially religious, but holiness as it stands in the sure and certain knowledge that there is a real, genuine, unconditional love reaching out and wrapping us in gentle arms of compassion, forgiveness, mercy, and love now and forever.

I want you and me to be touched by the gospel of Jesus Christ that is as real as air we breathe. In fact it is the air that our souls breathe when there is no pollution or smoke going in.

You know that foundation don't you?? It is through the arms of mother; the embrace of a father; the love of an aunt or neighbor, the good wishes of a friend. It is in the light of a smile that lightens our load, that brightens our day and even the darkest of nights, a light that comes through others, but is more than anything any human being can generate.

The good news is that there are people right here among us who understand this foundation, this way of living and dying at the table of shared abundance. The good news is that there are people here among us who reach across chasms that actually can be breached, those like the one the rich man in scripture failed to reach across, failed to understand as being a vital part of his relationship to God. These people are the hands that reach out across anything that would divide us, separate us from one another and from the love of God that is upon us all, for us all, and seeking to move each and every one of us, move us together despite all that would have it otherwise.

And those forces are very, very real. In Richmond how well we know them:

1. There is a chasm we call poverty that divides us from one another. We have roughly 40,000 in poverty here in Richmond; 20,000 of those are children. It is a harsh reality that every single one of us can see in our mind's eye: it is the reality of a level of economic deprivation that means such vulnerability. There is no safety net for these families – food, shelter, clothing is the struggle, and the choices are narrow, and the edge is thin between stepping down into violence out of frustration and deadly life-styles out of hopelessness.

This level of economic deprivation often means there are people at the gates of our homes, our city born into marginalization - they simply don't count in the work force,

the daily commutes, the opportunities of employment that earn esteem as well as health care and a better future for one's family. Although we would love to believe otherwise: the route to break free of poverty takes more than will-power of any one individual.

There are chasms here in Richmond.

2. There is a chasm created here among us that is about the false choices, the confusions and lures of what the good life really is. There are voices that lure us into drug use, into alcohol abuse, into sexual habits that de-humanize and maim, into a whole host of degradations and destructive habits of body, mind, and spirit here in Richmond.

There are chasms here in Richmond.

But today I am delighted to say that that there are those among us who know the gospel and understand forgiveness, and mercy, and the love of God that is working with or without us to breach these chasms, and to open up an abundant life right here and right now – and abundant future for all God's children. And if you are among those who don't have this gospel in your understanding, or you have forgotten it, or moved away from it, then move closer to ones who have been caught by it. I guarantee you, that gospel is contagious. And that is what we celebrate here today most of all!

There are those at work in Fairfield Court Elementary School - students and teachers and administrators and lunch buddies and tutors and mentors and teacher support groups --all fighting to close a chasm, and they are led by this one among us: Dr. Irene Williams.

There are those of the Peter-Paul Development Center - children and families and staff members and volunteers who read and take children on trips and donors and board members who give their talents - who understand that there are hands reaching out, and this is led by the Rev. Lynne Washington, Executive Director of the Center, who is among us as well.

Among us there are members of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, dedicated year after year to being there, housing PPDC and offering God's presence in worship, spirit, and truth

Here among us there is Child Savers staff and supporters, a non-profit in the East End who go at a moment's notice into the immediate aftermath of violence to hold the children.

Among us here are the hands of CrossOver Ministries - a staff who understands that health care and education is a commitment fundamental to being human, and nothing will stop them from delivering services where the need is, whether there is money, insurance, etc or not.

Among us are Boaz and Ruth people supporting those who have fallen and understand that help reaches across the chasm of being an ex-offender and even to them.

Among us are First Book people, dedicated to getting that reading material in homes and apartments in every corner of this city.

Today I look out and I see St. Stephen's church people who think about reaching out with their hands all the time. Inspired by the Fruit Loops who began a humble ministry in Gilpin Court after that community reached out to us upon the tragedy of Jamie Knight's death – I see St. Stephen's reaching within and through all these agencies I name above: Volunteers, workers, mentors, lunch buddies, board members, and donors and prayer-givers for all these.

And I am amazed, in thanksgiving. The gospel is alive, and sending us into life that is real life.

More than a decade ago, a Trinity student – Patch Torres - was picking up friends at a concert at the coliseum in downtown Richmond. He was killed. For no reason. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time I suppose you could say. At the graduation ceremony that year at St. Christopher's, the student Valedictorian's speech centered on that, because Patch was known and loved by students well beyond Trinity. The Valedictorian challenged us. He said, when the senseless killing of anyone in our city hits us and hurts us and outrages us as much as it does Patch's, then we will know that we are better people. My sense is that we are learning; we are brothers and sisters who are hearing the message of God, sent through Lazarus' hope.

When there was a tragic killing this summer in Fairfield Court, a mother of Fairfield Court Elementary students, I will look out this morning and I will see people who live all over this city who were horrified and shocked, but more importantly, in relationships that cared and went – housewives and counselors, pastors and principals, tutors and mentors, and frankly I must say that God's love lifted my spirits even in the midst of that, because there were the hands reaching across this city, in love and care.

Surely there is work to be done. Lord knows it seems overwhelming and never-ending, but let us take this day that the Lord has made and given to us, and stand on the foundation that is our hope and joy:

A foundation that is not based on wealth or poverty

A foundation that is not about east or west or anything else we might try to say is a divide –

A foundation that provides – as Paul says in this epistle – the life that is really life: living in the abundance of God's love upon us, in us, through us – this is God's compassion, the foundation of life in love and service that is, was, and always will be.

So today, rejoice and enjoy in God's spirit – and get to know one another – look at nametags and sit and chat and eat and drink and play, knowing we are one heart, and many hands across the city.