

I was a multisport kid in high school, but my main passion and heart was in basketball. I started when I was in seventh grade and when I was a sophomore in high school I got bumped up to the varsity team. Each year my role kind of shifted and adjusted because my skill set kept changing, I had started out as a center, but by the middle of high school my height had leveled out and there was no way that was where I belonged anymore. By junior year, I had kind of settled into a rhythm, my ball handling skills weren't great, so you couldn't pay me to be a point guard, but I had found my shot and kept honing it and so I sunk into my role as a shooting guard.

Senior year, I was actually a bit shocked because when we hit our first game, I was in the starting line up. I hadn't been a starter since I was a freshman, and so it was kind of weird to shift back into that role. Yet, something else happened my senior year of high school. In late September, I woke up with a sore throat so bad I could barely function, and my mom sent me to the doctor where I was promptly informed that I had mono. I was out of school for two weeks, and I wasn't allowed back on the basketball court for a month. I was devastated. It was my senior year and I was missing a huge chunk of our season. Eventually though, I was healthy enough to resume playing, but my first game back, things had changed. I wasn't starting anymore. I figured it was logical since I had been sick, but a couple

more games went by and nothing had changed. I was always the first sub into the game, but the message was clear, my role was different.

About a week or so into this change, my coach pulled me out of practice while we running drills, and I vividly remember him sitting down on the floor with me in the hallway outside the gym. He pretty much laid it out. I wasn't starting anymore, and I got it, I had been out for a month with an illness that had totally sapped my physical abilities, but then, he threw in another reason, and it's one that was well deserved even though I was entirely annoyed by it at the time. During the summer, we had optional workouts, and I took the optional seriously. I was there but not all the time and that was wholly my choice, but the girl who took my starting spot, she had been there every day. It was completely fair, but in the moment, I was like, this is ridiculous. I am not really a slacker type person, I work hard, I grind it out, but over the summer, I had definitely chilled, and I didn't like that being laid out for me quite so starkly. It was hard to hear, and it made me realize that I had absolutely assumed once I was healthy I would sink back into my previous role, because well...I thought maybe I deserved it.

It's a weird word...deserve. If we all thought about and were honest with ourselves, we could probably come up with a list of things that we think we deserve, things that we're simply entitled to. Maybe you've had

conversations with loved ones where you have said that you don't deserve them or that they are on the receiving end of something they don't deserve. We all have very clear lines in our mind of what is acceptable, what is warranted, what is deserved, and some of that is warranted, but far too often these conversations about what we deserve and don't deserve has more to do with just *who* we are, how we look, where we're from, than any real basis in reality of what we as human beings are deserving of. It's a tale as old as time, as we see this whole sense of deserving playing out both in Zephaniah and with John the Baptist on the banks of the River Jordan.

One of the things that I absolutely adore about our Bible study group is that folks tend to bring their own Bibles which leads us to vast and various translation questions and sometimes they're just plain fun and other times, well they cause a little ping in my brain that totally changes the course of a sermon. This was one such week and the kudos goes to Dave Carlson and his Bible translation. The translation of verse 16 of our first lesson in the bulletin says this, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak," but Dave's Bible said something else, it said, "Do not let your hands hang limp." Now, on the one hand that's just funny, but on the other hand it's a striking image. Dear people of Jerusalem, do not let your hands hang limp. What in the world is that about?

What it's about is that Zephaniah is talking to the people about the days when they will return home from exile in Babylon and have to start fresh in their relationship with God and with one another. Zephaniah is reminding the people that they might have a gut instinct to play it safe, to slide into status quo rituals and routines all in the name of normalcy and comfort now that they are home. He doesn't want them thinking that now that they have survived the exile and been through something admittedly horrendous that they can just coast now that they're home. Now that they are home they are to remember that they are called to be people of God's action, people with attentive hands towards the needs of their neighbor. Rote routine isn't the way to participate in God's kingdom, but active attention to the needs of those around them, to the needs of the world, that is how they are called to live into their identity as God's children. It would be easy for them to assume that since they have been through this awful exile that they get a pass on the hard work of God's calling for a little while, that they are deserving of a break, but the prophet reminds them that the world, their neighbors need their hands. The world deserves their attentiveness.

You hear echoes of a similar message in John the Baptist's sermon by the Jordan. I mean I have to say that calling folks a brood of vipers is an interesting evangelism tact, but then he really strikes at the heart of his

message. He tells those gathered, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” Rather he tells them that they are to bear fruits worthy of repentance. Again, what in the world does this mean?

What it means is that John is surrounded by folks who are pointing to their heritage, their family tree, and saying, because of this I *deserve* salvation, I don’t need to worry about all this baptism, repentance, returning to the Lord junk. We’re taken care of.

It seems that some of those who came out to hear John preach weren’t quite sure what role his message could play in their lives because to them, they were already taken care of spiritually by virtue of who they are and where they come from, rather than anything to do with their own actions in the kingdom of God. To them, they were deserving of salvation because that was part and parcel of their identity. Who needed to worry about actions or repentance? They had everything they needed right there in their genealogy.

Before we go judging these folks of either generation too harshly, I think it’s important for us to remember and honestly acknowledge how deeply easy it is to fall into this trap of limp hands and deservedness. I can truly say that there is not a day of my life where I have not been thankful to be Lutheran, I love our theology, our history, our liturgy, our calling, who we are truly, and yet...well...grace is a slippery slope. We cling to that

saved by grace thing with an assurance that is gorgeous, and yet sometimes, well, it becomes an excuse, it garners this misguided sense of deservedness. We acknowledge that nothing we do is going to earn our salvation, Jesus took care of that from day one, *but* that doesn't mean we get to let our hands hang limp in the kingdom of God, the identity of Christian doesn't make us deserving of some divine free pass to do what we will in the world. I think if John the Baptist emerged on the bank of the James today he would have a similar word to say, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Jesus as our Savior.'" Don't get me wrong, we do have Jesus as our Savior, just as those of Ancient Israel had Abraham as their ancestor, that is deeply true, but it doesn't mean that we get off scot free in the grand scheme of serving our neighbor, working in the world, and striving for justice.

Sometimes we see people who are struggling and there's that instinctive voice, "Well, if they just had Jesus..." but here's the thing, *they do have Jesus*, because they have us. *We* are supposed to be Jesus to them. Their salvation is just as assured as ours, but knowing their loved, knowing that they're seen, knowing that they are accepted, knowing that they are valued, knowing that they aren't alone? That's up to us. Our neighbors need our hands and the world needs our hearts. Complacency has no place in the kingdom of God. Apathy has no place in the kingdom of God. We

serve not so that we can point to our list of deeds and say this is why we *deserve* salvation, we serve because we are saved, and that salvation frees us to go out into the world and get our hands dirty.

I think sometimes we get stuck in the Advent message of waiting. We're supposed to be waiting for the Lord, waiting for Jesus, and far too often we view waiting as a *passive* experience, like we don't need to be active until Jesus is *right around the corner*. Yet, Advent, frankly every season, is meant to be a time of action, a time of attentiveness to our neighbor. We are called to look at God's world and *see* it, see the people in it, see the needs around us, not just see through people as though they aren't there, as though they aren't important. There are so many places in this world where God calls us to work and move and yet so often we just stay still, waiting, waiting for...well, I don't honestly know what.

Do me a favor, look at your hands. Really look at them. The lines in them, the veins that course through, the nails which may be manicured or knicked up, the rough places, the smooth planes. Those hands, *your* hands are a gift from God, a gift given to you to mold and shape the world around you and the lives of those you meet. And so, my prayer for all of us in these waning days of Advent is that these very hands may not hang limp, but may stretch into the world and change it. **AMEN!!!**