

"A Community Equipped for Ministry" 2016
 Exodus 35:1-2, 20-22, 25-26, 29-31, 36:1
 1 Corinthians 12:1-2, 4-13, 27

Last Tuesday evening, youth from the communicants class met with the elders serving on Session and were enthusiastically received into church membership. It was one of those special moments of faith and celebration, because of the beautiful way they spoke about their faith and joining this church, was so inspiring and such a blessing to us all.

By grace and faith we have all been grafted into the body of Christ, which is the church, our faith community and family... where we develop and live out our faith as we participate and usefully in the life and mission of the Church as an expression of our shared faith and commitments. The Church of Jesus Christ is uniquely where we grow in God's grace, equipping us to serve the Church's mission and purpose, so that together, we make a difference in this world.

In the Exodus passage that we read earlier, the Israelites have been freed from slavery in Egypt, the 10 Commandments have been given as instructions for living together in community, and now they are to build the tabernacle or tent of meeting, as the place where God's Presence will dwell among them, and where they will worship along their journey into the Promised Land.

The last third of Exodus describes that grand building project that will require all them, to cooperate and work together well. Back when they were slaves, their focus was mostly on survival, with each slave looking out for their own self-interest. But now, this tabernacle construction project was all about learning to cooperate and work together with each person sharing and adding their part to this community project.

And beyond the practicality of having a place to worship, the tabernacle was about responding to God's grace and mercy, and together cooperating according to God's purpose. Notice in the text, that God did the equipping, giving skill and understanding to the artisans and builders, and God made the hearts of the people willing and eager to give generously all the resources that were needed... as a tangible way to put their slave experience behind them.

It was God at work providing the necessary skills and resources, and the Israelites responding by offering their gifts ----

- with everyone delighted and wanting to participate... so much so, that that in the next verses, they have given so generously, the workers ask Moses to tell the people to stop giving, because more had been given than they could use.

Can you imagine hearing the Finance and Administration Committee urge everyone to stop giving for a while, because they can't possibly find ways to spend it all, or the Christian Education Committee urge our members, "**Please, no more volunteers, we just can use all of you.**"

This was Israel at their best, the chosen people of God in their finest hour freely and obediently giving with amazing generosity. **They were sharing and serving from the abundance of the Lord, which is also the message of the 1st Corinthians passage.**

The Apostle Paul had started the church in Corinth, but after he moved on some problems had developed. So he wrote, trying to help them think through their issues theologically...**i.e. how does your Christian faith and God's grace inform your decisions and transform how you live?**

One of the significant issues they were struggling with in Corinth as divisive conflict over misunderstanding spiritual gifts.

vs. 1

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. (or, don't take this lightly, it's important)

Paul's first point, vs. 4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

Just as in the Exodus story, God gives the appropriate skills, understanding & resources, all that is needed to fulfill the Church's mission well. And all of it comes from God **as a gift** in wonderful abundance so, there really is no place for human pride or arrogance as if my particular gifts were any better or more important, or more useful and necessary than anyone else's.

What God chooses & gives is always appropriate and fits perfectly. And though some may be more publically visible than others, all are equally reflections of God's grace, and all are needed for the church to fulfill its mission. And God intends by our unique gifts to show that we need each other, and that we fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

And since no one person possesses all of the necessary gifts we need it really doesn't matter which piece of the puzzle we are, for if any piece is missing, the picture will be incomplete and flawed.

* **Each piece, each and every person is necessary and significant.**

** Paul's second point, vs. 7

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

It's not about you or me, but it's all about the common good, for God's purpose of building up the Church for its mission

Yes, a single soloist can sound lovely and carry a tune, but how much better and how much more inspiring when a choir listens and blends, singing together in rich harmony. So too the Church, the people of God are called to serve together. In faithful humility we are called to combine and blend our individual and particular gifts, skills and offerings, all of us to serve together joyfully for the glory of God.

That is the shared and meaningful life together that our Lord intends and desires for His beloved and blessed people. And Paul's message to the Corinthians and to us is that, any emphasis on an individual or their gift is out of balance, for God blesses us **through our interdependence**.

All of us are each entrusted with blessings for the whole body. God bestows wonderful gifts for benefit of the whole church, given to us as grace and blessing beyond our salvation, → **to equip us to do something extraordinary - to do ministry**.

God intends for the gifts we're given to help unify us as a body, and to equip the whole body to fulfill our mission together... but too often we allow separation and pride to divide us.

Some withhold their gifts and never get around to using the gifts entrusted to them. And because they hold back, and don't or won't use their gifts, their faith fades, weakens and stagnates into far less **than the effective servants God created them to be**. That's tragic, for there is no greater joy or fulfillment possible, than when we freely and appropriately offer & use of our gifts. Nothing is more satisfying or rewarding than doing that which we are best equipped and gifted to do well.

By Grace God has called and equipped each one of us, and God has also uniquely fitted every one of us to complement each other and our various gifts, **so that together we can accomplish God's mission and purpose.**

The ideal as it's described in Scripture is that each one of us lives out the full blessing and abundant satisfaction of freely serving joyfully with our particular gifts.

And as we grow and mature, and we face new life-circumstances, our opportunities to serve and to make a difference will change with new emphasis and new gifts for ministry... but in the company of fellow travelers along our faith-journey, for it is always within a Christian community that we are called to live out our faith & God's love.

Friends, let us never forget **that God loves all of us infinitely, and has given us all wonderful things that we can do; wonderful ways to serve joyfully for the common good, to live out a meaningful and fulfilling Christian life... for as long as we live, there is always some way that we can make a difference.**

Today we are going to ordain and install church officers, elders, those who serve to rule, dream and govern this church and deacons, who serve to guide and carry out our ministries of compassion, and we'll commission Rev. Hicks as our Parish Associate. I urge you, that as we celebrate their call to serve faithfully, please reflect on your own calling, remember to you too are called and gifted by God to serve... therefore, in your heart and mind, apply the vows you hear to whatever service and ministry God has entrusted to you.

Consider God's word in Ephesians 4:11~15, 1 Peter 4:3

The gifts he gave were ... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. ... Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ... Whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.