

We have come to the fourth week of our sermon series on the membership vows of the United Methodist Church. By way of review, we began with the importance of vowing to be present with God and with each other in Worship and in small group community. We then talked about the importance of prayer and how it connects us together with God. Last week, we talked about the importance of mimicking God's generosity with our financial resources. (If you missed any of these weeks, we do have copies of the sermons on the table in the Narthex, and we post the sermon videos on the website.)

These three areas – presence, prayers, and gifts – are spiritual practices that can be done here in Worship or within the community here. We come, we gather together, we share the joy in being together, and it feels good to just be here and share our lives together. We truly feel the presence of God when we're together. It's a wonderful opportunity to escape from our tired routines of everyday life and just soak up the presence of God.

But, there's more than that, to being a true follower of Christ and to grow our faith. A shift has to happen. If we truly want to experience the life that God intends for us, "there comes a point where we shift from being merely recipients of grace to being channels of grace to others. If we want to continue growing into a life that is centered on loving God and loving others, there comes a time when we no longer hold God's love for ourselves but find ways to share it with others. If we want to live a life worthy of our high calling, there comes a point where we stop being spectators and become participants in God's transformation

of the world."<sup>1</sup> As participants, we offer ourselves to be used by God. When we join the church, we vow to serve. We don't just come and sit. We vow to use our unique gifts to further the kingdom of God.

A month ago, I was commissioned by the bishop into ordained ministry. Even though I have practiced ministry under a license for the past year, there was something different that happened during this experience. It's really hard to explain, but it is kind of like when you get married or when you experience the birth of your children. You can imagine what it's going to be like as a spouse or a parent, but when you actually are, there's just a shift that happens. Well, I hate to tell you that I'm not the only minister here. It's not just my job to share the love of God. We're all in ministry together. Upon our baptism, the Holy Spirit equips us with unique gifts to use us as agents of God's love. We are to work together as a whole to bring about the kingdom of God.

Paul, in our scripture, was trying to tell the Romans this very thing. Verses 4-6 in the *Message* translation says, "We are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So, since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't."

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<sup>1</sup> James Harnish, *A Disciple's Path*, Kindle edition, location 1145.

As we search within ourselves to find our purpose, our job, the reason for our being here, look at how we fit in the body of Christ. Become self-aware of your own talents and shortcomings. Don't admire someone's gifts and purpose and say, "I want to do that" because someone else is called to do that job. And, don't think, "I could do that better than he or she is doing it." Focus on your own work. God has given each of us special gifts to find our place within the body to serve, and we serve as one. We can't do all this work by ourselves. We need each other, and we need the power from the Holy Spirit to equip us.

Richard Rohr, one of my favorite theologians and spiritual teachers, said, "God created each of us with particular gifts that we can discover and use in the service of co-creating a more whole and loving world. There are many parts of the Body of Christ; I am only one part, a "mouth." When I first began to teach, no one was more surprised than I was that some people valued what I had to say!" He credits that it was all from God's grace that he is able to speak well.

I think we all feel like Rohr did at some point in our lives and think that our unique gifts couldn't possibly be valuable to someone else. And, does anyone else here besides me sometimes feel like the armpit of the body of Christ? I mean, it has a function – it attaches the arms to the body that does great work in helping others, but it gets awkward and smelly sometimes. Am I right? We may never know how our gifts can be used by God. Even a smelly armpit can be used by God, and it makes the work of the arms and the hands possible to do their jobs.

Some of you are thinking, I have no idea what my gifts are. We may recognize that we're good with numbers or working

with children or working on the roof. And, we may recognize when we're not good with those things. When seeking what your gifts are, the first place to start is prayer. Ask God to show you your gifts. Pray that God will help you discover the unique place God has for you.

God can help you discover your gifts by taking a spiritual gifts assessment. There are many online, but I like the one on the UMC's website because it's fairly short with only about 20 questions. There are also descriptions and suggestions on how to serve under the results. In the bulletin, there's the link (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/spiritual-gifts-online-assessment>) or just goggle "UMC and spiritual gifts".

You can also explore these questions: What makes your heart sing? What makes you feel alive? I love the quote by Dr. Howard Thurman, theologian and civil rights leader: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Find out what makes you feel alive and serve in the areas that make your heart sing. Don't serve in areas just because the pastor asked you to or because no one else would do it. Don't keep serving in an area just because you've always done it. Maybe it's time to step down and find something new that really makes you feel alive. Because everyone around you know when something makes you feel alive. Everyone around us – the whole world even – benefits when we do the work that makes us come alive.

That work is how we know we've found our place in the body of Christ, and its very important work. We serve because we know we are called to it, and it makes a difference in people's lives. Here's a great reminder of how important it is for us to make that shift from receiving to serving:

“There are children who may never hear the stories of Jesus if people with the gift of teaching do not teach them.

There are lost, confused, spiritually searching people who may never experience God’s love unless people with the gift of evangelism share the good news with them.

There are adults who may never grow in their understanding of Scripture until someone with the gift of discernment guides them.

There are people who may never find their way into the church until people with the gift of hospitality welcome them.

There are people with broken hearts and broken lives who may never find healing until people with the gift of intercession pray for them.

There are new opportunities for new ministries that may never be accomplished unless people with the gift of leadership show others the way.

There are lonely, isolated people who may never find their way into Christian community until people with the gift of mercy extend care to them.

There are important issues of justice and peace that never will be confronted until people with the gift of prophecy confront them.”<sup>2</sup>

God has work to be done in this world that will not get done until we make

that shift from receiving to giving. God accomplishes the transformation of the world through us, and when we take the membership vows, we promise to do our part. We are all called together as one body to share the gospel message in our unique ways. We all have a purpose to make our hearts sing and to share that song with the world...and we need to do it now more than ever.

It is so easy for us, Lord, to diminish the gifts you have given us. We have come to believe that either we are experts in some areas or we know nothing. Each of us has been given special talents and gifts that can be used to help others, but for some reason we have chosen not to use these gifts, deciding that they are unimportant or not needed. Forgive us when we make decisions not to act. Help us look at the blessings that you have poured into our lives and to discover the special talents that we have. Open the doorways of service that we may go forth to serve you in this world. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Location 1298

<sup>3</sup><https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1450/classic-worship-connection-august-27-2017>