

Serve the Work!

Ephesians 4:7, 11-16

First Presbyterian Church
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Ah, sunrise at Hodge Hall. Seeing that dawn was a sure sign. Not that I had gotten up early for devotions. But that I had stayed up all night to finish a paper. When the birds are singing and you're still typing, you know you've procrastinated too long. The inventor Thomas Edison said that "genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." As a young writer, I didn't want that to be true. I was long on imaginative ideas, and very short on discipline. I saw too many dawns. I had to learn that if you want a creative vision to enter the world, you have to *serve the work*.

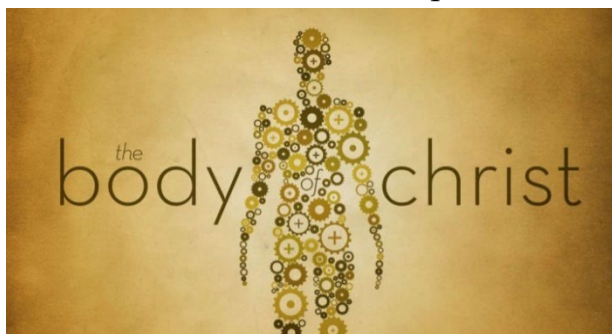


An idea may come in a flash, but bringing it to daylight takes hours, maybe months of work. A gardener sees the plants full grown and in full bloom in a flowing pattern. But months pass as she gets rocks out of the ground and pulls weeds, places the saplings at just the right distance, waters, fights insects and keeps constant watch. My son the commercial underwriter may read a financial statement and get a gut feeling about a company. But before he can recommend that his firm risks millions of dollars in a loan, he has to *serve the work*. Dig into the numbers. Have conversations. Make projections. Then follow through the years of the loan to help keep them on track. A family sends you the Christmas card with the perfect picture of smiling people in some lovely destination. What fun they had last summer! But what did it take to get the kids into those outfits? To enforce smiles? To endure the travel torture and delays? In every case, to make a vision a reality, we have to *serve the work*.

That's exactly true of Christ's church. Scripture offers us several pictures of this. We are the *bride* of Christ preparing for her wedding day. The church of Jesus Christ awaits his return to marry us and make all things new and restored. Meanwhile, we're striving to adorn ourselves for him in holiness and love for each other. To change pictures, Jesus our head, wants his *body* the church to be built up to maturity in faith, hope and love. To change pictures again, Jesus wants his church, his living *temple* to rise ever higher and expand ever wider to include all who will come to him. Jesus has a vision for the church universal. He expresses it in pictures of a bride, a body, and a temple. Every local congregation belongs to the one church. We each and all have our part of this vision to enact. We have to *serve the work*, the work of Christ who builds his church as his way of reaching the world with his love.

In our passage today, Paul writes that "grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." Paul means that each Christian has been "graced" with particular gifts that can be employed to *serve the work* of building the church. Peter put it this way, "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (I Peter 4: 10). That's been a theme verse for us this last month. We've been watching videos of how our members stewards God's grace in our church. That is, we're talking about how we serve Christ's vision for his church by serving each other and the community. Our local congregation focusses and intensifies our serving Christ in the world. Everyone has been given the Holy Spirit to lead us to do what needs to be done. But the Spirit expresses himself through the uniqueness of each member. Quite often, we get to serve through deploying our spiritual gifts.

Paul describes the process. [Christ] "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." The prophets, the writers of the Old Testament, laid a foundation for our faith, recounting God's mighty deeds and holy commands. Jesus Christ, however, enters the world and is revealed as the cornerstone of God's whole plan. Then his apostles built on that foundation by



recording and sharing the words and deeds of Jesus. Now the pastors and teachers in the churches disciple the congregations, helping to form people in Christ. All of this, Paul says, is to equip the saints, that is, everyone who believes into Jesus, for their work of ministry. The Word of God, the sacraments, the

pastoring and teaching equip each of us to *serve the work* of building up the body of Christ.



This is a crucial phrase: *to equip the saints for the work of ministry*. We need to break down a few of the words to realize just how potent this is. Pastors and teachers exist to “equip” believers. That word literally means “to adjust downwards” so that something functions completely and harmoniously.

Screw that bulb down tight so the light doesn’t flicker. Tighten down the blade so it doesn’t wobble when the engine runs. Arrange the gear in that backpack so the heavier stuff is not at the top but packed down to the middle so you can carry it the whole way.

So we can understand Sunday worship as an *adjustment*. All week long, we get squeezed by the many demands upon us. Much of the world around us lives for nothing higher than personal gain, pleasure and affluence. People function with no regard to the God who made us and went to such lengths to save us. It’s depressing out there. But we arrive here together and get an adjustment. We hear the sacred story. We get recalibrated to the truth. We get re-energized for our mission to be different *from* the lost world so we can be of gospel service *to* that lost world for which Christ gave his life. We lift up our attention to something higher. We raise our hearts to Christ Jesus who loves us and gave his life for us. We open our arms to one another. Here we can be at home. Here we can share our burdens, and help lift other’s burdens. Here we make connections that encourage us and fuel us all week long. The deeper we go, the more this becomes so. The more of our hearts we share, the more these relationships mean to us. The more we learn of God’s Word and his will, the more energized our lives become. The more we feel the Spirit propelling us into mission, the more we see our whole lives lit up with Christ’s purpose for us. Church life is meant to be equipping. Recalibrating. Repacking the pieces of our lives so we can journey on.

This equipping fills us, relieves us, changes us. This equipping, though, is not just so we can personally feel a bit more peace in a crazy world. This equipping has a purpose. So the saints—that’s us—can do the *work of ministry*. The ministry of the church belongs to each and all of the church. Paul uses such a great word. It’s the same word from which we get “deacon.” If you ever wondered why we call our board of deacons the diaconate, it’s because of the word *diakonia*. It means service.



Literally, the service that comes from feet that move so fast they kick up dust. Who knew they had Looney Tunes back in Paul's days? I can just see the way the Tasmanian Devils would get spinning and dust would kick up before he zipped away. We're each called to deacon service, ministry, seeing what needs to be done and making it happen.

Paul gives the purpose of this service, this deacon ministry, we're getting equipped for: to *build up* the body of Christ. To strengthen and grow Christ's church, making it healthy, mature, and unshakeable. Every local congregation is an outpost of God's kingdom. We're a beach head in a hostile world. We're a mission station. We're a demonstration, *a model*, of the love Christ Jesus has for the world. Our gospel is meant to be shared. But it only works when the body of Christ shows his love by loving and serving each other. We help each other grow. We become a community others want to be part of. We invite, we welcome, we build into our lives the new believers. But that all depends on the health of the body of the local church.



That's where our giftedness and our service comes in. Others have built into me so I can build into others. Each of us is called to serve Christ by serving his body. That's a complete reversal from a *consumer model*. The consumer says that church exists to move me, pleasure me, help me when I have time and interest to spare. I join in when and how it helps me.

That may be a place new believers start. But that's not the maturity to which Christ calls us. I belong to Christ which means I am a member of his body. And his body is always expressed locally in congregations. If I'm a member of First Presbyterian, it means I took vows in front of the elders. I said I believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior and want to be his disciple. I said I would do that through the particular church to which he calls me. And I said First Presbyterian is that church.

So I expect that the pastors and teachers will equip me for the work of ministry. I know I have to *serve the work* of building the body of Christ. Regular, joyful attendance with energetic participation in worship begins it all. So does coming early enough and staying late enough to connect with people. So does

being part of a class or circle or home group to grow deeper. So does using my time and gifts to make the church be the church.

Every November we ask our congregation to make financial commitments to sustain the work of ministry in our church. That's important. And I always remind folks about how your leadership is simultaneously prudent and visionary. We are prudent because we never build out a projected church budget beyond what we can expect our members to give. We are visionary because we never build out a projected church budget that is less than what we expect our members to give. This way every single gift matters. It all counts, whether it's modest or enormous, we're putting it into play. This way, everyone who gives a dollar or a hundred thousand dollars can say, "I'm in this, I'm in all of it." I love that. Rhonda and I love being personally invested financially in our beloved church. We know that signaling what we estimate we can give is an important part of the leadership's planning. We know that the sooner we get in our estimate of giving card, the more smoothly the ministry planning goes. We make it about serving the church by deliberate, timely dedication of what we estimate we can give.

Next week, we will dedicate those estimates of giving like usual. But we also want to take it up a notch. To make it more holistic. We want everyone to make an act of dedication of time and talent to the work of ministry in our church. For most of us that will mean just making note of what we're already doing and offering it once more to Christ as an act of worship. For some of us, we might add something new we'd like to do in service. That catalogue we created lets you know of more than 70 ways you can serve the work of Christ's ministry.

I think it will be a joyful day. We'll signal to the Lord Jesus that we know he calls his bride, his body, his temple, his church to come together in local congregations. And for this season of life this is our church. We've been graced and gifted to give back to God through serving the ministry.

So finally, here's the bonus. The church gathered re-adjusts us to the reality of God week by week. When we learn of our share in the work of ministry, we begin to view not just church life but *all* of life through this lens. Everything that matters requires that we *serve the work* that makes the vision come to be. This can be keeping house, raising a family, living a profession, landscaping, accounting, teaching, leading, cleaning. When *serving the work of Christ* through his church gets in our blood, we realize that we can do our whole lives for his sake. It's all ministry. And therefore it's all the adventure of journeying with Jesus in the company of these saints he's given you.