

With Whatever Gift You've Got
I Peter 4:8-11, Philippians 2:4
November 8, 2020
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Like all of us in the workforce right now, my job has changed completely since March 19 when our state issued a mandatory order to shelter at home. It hasn't just been learning how to go completely online for worship, connection and service, I have found that four things, not spelled out so explicitly in my job description, have become priorities for what I do here. I must be a person who rejects despair, holds onto hope, practices spiritual resilience and preaches a message of faithfulness to the gospel of love and justice. I confess that someday these four things have been harder to do than learning a whole new method of pastoral ministry.

And this has been a very rough week here in the United States. Our political differences are on full and ugly display while we are in the middle of a pandemic with new Covid-19 cases higher than ever. As we waited for results of this election and whatever the ensuing aftermath would be, I found it hard to get out of bed and face another day. All my old standbys – the things I have done to distract myself from the discouragement of our present-day reality – have not been as effective lately. I am not one who easily succumbs to despair, but I flirted on the edge of her cliff this week.

One of the things that makes hope difficult for us is that we feel like we are insignificant in the power structure of our nation and world. How do we make a difference? Do our actions, in our own little corners of the world, hold any significance in the enormity of this time?

So, this week I sat down and did some reading in the history book that Galen Beery and Evelyn Hollinger wrote about the Brethren of La Verne. I know that seems like a weird choice for how to make it through this week, but it helped. Its pages are filled with stories about how the Brethren founded the institution that is now the University of La Verne; donated to create the local cemetery; and over the years many members of this church served on the local school board, City Council, and non-profit organizations too numerous to recount. It documents how members of this church established Camp La Verne and fought for the creation of Hillcrest Retirement community. I read about how members of this church cared about their siblings around the globe serving as missionaries, conscientious objectors and civil rights activists. It tells of rough times in the church and the world that this congregation weathered together, for example, continuing in faith to build this beautiful sanctuary after the stock market crashed; surviving the influenza epidemic of 1918; responding to the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s.

And these are just the things that seemed noteworthy enough to write about. But think of the thousands of sermons that seemed of little consequence preached to thousands of ears. Think of the congregational singing that that inspired people to make it through

the challenges of everyday living. Think of the thousands of parents whispering about Jesus into the ears of thousands of children squirming in the pew. Think of the thousands of people who came up out of the water pledging to stay true to continuing the work of Jesus. Think of all the Christmas Eves and Easter Sundays and memorial services and weddings and Love Feasts.

Reading from the pages of that book helped me remember what it looks like when a group of people use whatever gifts they have been given for the glory of God and their neighbor's good. Reading about the faithfulness of those who have gone before us helped me back away from the precipice of woe by reminding me that this is a collective ministry. We do this work together, surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. One of the challenges of our time is that we are separated physically from each other and so it is harder to get that sense of shared ministry. But let me assure you, it exists in new and even exciting ways. We each bring what we have and, by the grace of God it becomes something bigger and more long-lasting than we ever imagined. Because of reading about our history this week I was able to grasp what faithful living and acts of service do to change the landscape of individual lives, a church and a town.

Last week, Pastor Dawna preached about turning the soil during this time of political division. She said, "Regardless of what happens on November 3, whether your candidate loses or whether your candidate wins, there will be work to do on November 4." Such true words. This is a time that requires our faithful living and acts of service to once again change the landscape of division in our communities, our nation and our world.

The problem is that it is hard for us to know where to start when there are just so much work to be done. It is how I feel when I'm cleaning my house. As I return a stack of things, I have moved out to the living room, back to my bedroom, I see what I need to do there, and I start cleaning in the bedroom. Then when I take a glass back to the kitchen from my bedroom, I decide to unload the dishwasher while I'm there. Even cleaning my house feels like a disorganized and distracted process. Service and justice work have that same kind of feel.

Where to start? I would suggest we think of our service and justice seeking using In-N-Out Burger as a model. One of the things that makes In-n-Out so unusual is its very simple menu. Do you want a hamburger, cheeseburger or Double Double? Even the drinks are limited. Of course, there are a few things you can order that aren't on the menu, but they really are just adaptations of the printed menu: protein style burger, grilled cheese, animal style fries, lemon-up. Wow! I can smell In-N-Out food just talking about it.

Okay, back to my point! The brilliance of In-N-Out is that it does a simple thing really well. It doesn't try to do everything. They don't serve eggrolls and burgers. The Apostle Paul, in the scripture that Curtis read to us, tells us to keep it simple and excellent: love, welcome, serve and speak the words of God....love, welcome, serve and speak the words of God.

Paul says: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." We have all been graced with gifts we are given as individuals to use for the good of others. Of course, we don't all have the same gifts. Some of us don't know what our gifts are and some of us know it very clearly. I believe I was given the gift to preach but I didn't know that for quite some time. One of the reasons I fought the idea of pastoral ministry was I didn't have a scrap of desire to preach. It looked to me like preachers had to write an essay a week and then read it to a bored, captive audience. Everything about that sounded horrid to me.

But it turns out I love to preach. Love it! I love everything about it. It is so different than I thought it would be. I can't believe that I went kicking and screaming into something I feel so blessed to be allowed to do. Don't know what your gifts are? Experiment. Try things out and ask yourself, "Does this bring me joy? Do I feel like I was made to do this?" Then do that thing and lean into it. That is what Linda said to us about why she gives. She wants to use her resources in ways that bring her joy. We want to serve in ways that bring us joy.

So, keep it simple. Use the gift you have been given and serve with excellence. That is how we keep on the tradition of our spiritual ancestors who each used their individual gifts collectively to create something strong, faithful and beautiful...in good times and trying times. As a church we have collective gifts. Let me tell you what I think they are. We know how to be community to each other. We know how to do that during healthy times or during a pandemic or a time of political divide.

Service is one of our greatest gifts. We know how to grow food, make food and deliver food to help feed our neighbors. We create kits for Children's Disaster Services when we are required to practice social distance. And when we can't gather for our Alternative Gift Faire, we have an Alternative Alternative Gift Faire.

Another one of our collective gifts is justice work. Inclusion, racial justice, immigrant justice, climate change...this church stands up in solidarity.

We are gifted with generosity of time, talent and money. When we combine our individual gifts, we create community, we serve, struggle for justice and give extravagantly.

There is something sacred that happens when we lean into our specific gifts and blend them together. It is the way our choir works. Everyone brings their voice and Nike brings her talent of direction and Shawn brings his gift of composing and his ability to use accompaniment to fill in the gaps and our choir sounds heavenly and they sing with joy.

It happens here each week with online worship. Most of us who have to film ourselves for worship doubt our abilities. Almost every time I ask one of you to participate in this format, I get a communication afterwards of how demoralizing and difficult it was to

participate in this way. I fully understand....and yet through the wonder of editing and the gift of each of us bringing what we have, worship becomes something beautiful, authentic and holy.

Friends, our gifts are needed in this world....now more than ever. For all of us have four things in our job description now, whether we are retired, employed or not yet in the workforce; Democrat, Republican or Independent; black, white or brown. As we continue the work of Jesus in this time of isolation and unrest, we must reject despair, hold onto hope, practice spiritual resilience and speak the Gospel of love and justice. There is work to do and we are so blessed to be able to do it together. Amen.