

Theme: We discover purpose when we respond to God’s call to ministry

Scripture: [Jesus said] *I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another* (John 13:34).

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Consider the pantomime you’ve just watched. Pantomimes are a visual dramatic portrayal that you have to watch closely as there are no words to explain the action. So, what do you think the message of the pantomime we’ve just seen might be? (*Open discussion with the congregation.*)

Last week we looked at PURPOSE, the 3rd of the three needs all human beings have in common, in addition to a need for a sense of IDENTITY and BELONGING. Last Sunday, the sermon focused on the truth that God calls each of us to mission – and that is our God-given purpose. We had two examples from scripture: the mission of the prophet Jonah, and the mission that Jesus gave to his disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening.

Remember Jonah? God called Jonah and gave him a mission to the city of Nineveh. Jonah saw the Ninevites as enemies; his hatred and anger – his grudge so to speak – was so strong that he refused to follow the call of God. So he sailed on a ship in the opposite direction from Nineveh. His grudge resulted in a powerful storm that would have sunk the ship upon which he was traveling. Holding on to his grudge got Jonah buried in the depths of the sea, and it was then that he prayed to God. God rescued him and gave him a second chance.

In last week’s gospel reading (John 20:19-31) Jesus appears to his disciples as they hide behind locked doors on that first Easter Sunday evening. He says to them: *“As the father as sent me, so I send you.”* Jesus has commissioned these followers to the same mission, the same purpose, that he himself had received from his Father. But Jesus knows these disciples are ill-equipped to undertake their purpose, so he breathes on them, saying, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”* In so doing, Jesus empowers his followers to fulfil their mission, their purpose.

And that brings us to today’s readings and focus. We are all given a purpose by God, but how do we go about living into that purpose and undertaking our mission? Our scriptures today may provide us with some insight into that query.

I hope you paid attention to the reading this morning from I Corinthians. St. Paul makes it quite clear in his letter to the Corinthians that each one of us has been given spiritual gifts for the common good, for the work of ministry. Remember, Jesus breathed the Spirit into his followers. And the reading from I Corinthians promises that a manifestation of that same Spirit is given to each person. Imagine that! Each one of us has already been given a spiritual gift! Paul is quite clear about that, but he is also clear that there are “varieties of gifts” and “varieties of services.” This means that none of us has all the gifts of the Spirit necessary to fulfil God’s purpose. And if no one has all the gifts of the Spirit, then neither is anyone expected to do everything; no one is expected to be “all things to all people.” But we are all expected to use whatever gifts and talents that God has bestowed upon us *“for the common good.”* Consider the Pantomime we watched – it took several youth working together to make the “box for the fox.” The question is not whether each of us has been empowered by the Holy Spirit with some special gift – we have been! The

question is whether or not we are actually exercising whatever gift(s) God has given to us in ministry. The functioning of we, the body of Christ, depends upon the functioning of each and every one of us.

Several years ago God taught me, in a most concrete way, the truth that the whole depends upon the functioning of all the individual parts. My husband and I began a vacation trip to Maine in an old 1980 Dodge van. We had packed up the vehicle – including our three dogs – and headed north for a two week stay at a rustic cabin we had rented, right on the coast. We planned two days to get to our destination and the first day went just fine. But on the 2nd morning as we turned the key in the van’s ignition to continue our journey, there was nothing except a clicking sound. This led to the 1st call to AAA. The mechanic wasn’t quite sure what was wrong but suggested that perhaps the ignition coil needed replacing. Three hours later we started off again, knowing that we would now have a three-day trip to Maine instead of only two days.

On the third morning we loaded up the van, our dogs, and ourselves. We turned the key in the ignition – NOTHING, except the same clicking noises. This meant a 2nd call to AAA with the van being towed to a garage and we had a very long wait. Finally, in mid-afternoon, the mechanic called to say he could find nothing wrong with the van; it had tuned right over when he tried to start it, so please come get the vehicle. We spent a third night on the road! Strangely, we had no more trouble on that trip; in fact, we had no more trouble for about 2 months.

Then one day at our home, the van would not start again. After another call to AAA, there was yet another visit to a mechanic. This mechanic also found nothing wrong as the engine turned right over when he tried to start the vehicle. But he suggested we replace the battery in hopes that this might help. This we did. But a month later, the car stalled again as my husband drove it out of our driveway. This time a different mechanic suggested we replace the carburetor, suggesting that this might be the source of the malfunction. We now had a new ignition coil, a new battery, and a new carburetor, but the engine stalled yet again not much later. This time we just let it sit for 3 weeks in the driveway, trying to decide what to do with the vehicle. Then one day, Bob went out and stuck the key in the ignition and, of course, the engine turned over immediately. So we took the van to a different mechanic to see if the cause of this intermittent starting problem could be diagnosed and repaired. This mechanic replaced a module called the reluctor-trigger wheel assembly. I had never heard of such a part, but I quickly learned. It’s a sealed unit that couldn’t be tested but was necessary to distribute the spark from the ignition coil through the distributor to the spark plugs. After that one part was replaced we thereafter had no more problems with intermittent starting of our van.

The point of this particular vehicular episode is that the intermittent malfunctioning of one part of the van led to a great loss of time, a lot of frustration, and additional expense trying to get the vehicle to operate the way it was intended. To operate correctly, the vehicle depended on the proper functioning of all its parts, not just some of its parts. If you think about it, the church is a lot like that van: as St. Paul has written, we are the body of Christ – the Church – and the Church depends on the functioning of all, not just some, of its members. Scripture promises that we have all been given gifts for the building up the body – for the work of ministry. None of us has all the gifts of the Spirit; but each of us does have some gift. As Paul wrote: *“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12:7). The question is not whether we are all gifted but whether we are actually exercising our particular gift in ministry.

The stole I'm wearing this morning reminds me that it takes all of us exercising our various gifts to fulfil our mission – it takes many hands. In today's gospel reading, Jesus uses his hands to wash the disciples feet at the last meal he will share with them before the crucifixion – it's a living demonstration of how they are to live. And after he finishes washing their feet, Jesus gives them their mandate, their purpose. He says to them: *"I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"* (John 13:34). Jesus makes clear that **our purpose is to love others as he has loved us** – serving one another in humility with whatever gifts we have. But to do so means that each of us must cultivate and exercise those gifts with which God has endowed us. We saw this portrayed in this morning's pantomime as it took several persons – all exercising their gifts, their insight, their willingness to work together – to fulfil the mission to build a box.

There are many reasons why you or I may not actually exercise our particular spiritual gifts. Some people simply **don't know** or haven't identified what their particular gifts might be. Other people may recognize their particular gifts but **underestimate** their importance or don't think their particular gifts have much value in the greater scheme of things. Still other people allow **fear** to prevent them from exercising their gift. Exploring more fully the reasons why people do not exercise their spiritual gifts requires far more time than this one sermon allows. But for now, simply consider the following.

For each of us there is a type of ministry for which we are naturally suited and gifted – we all have a calling. We can begin to identify that calling by listening to the voice of our own best self and then responding to that voice. Maybe it's something we've just "always wanted to do;" or something we "love" to do and something for which we have a passion; or maybe it's something that just "grabs" us and won't go away. In other words, the Holy Spirit speaks to our inner self, drawing us, giving us a **desire**. So this week take a few moments to reflect on the question: *"What are my particular spiritual gifts?"* Ask yourself what you love to do best, and pray that God will speak to your heart and enlighten your mind. Then listen to the Holy Spirit within you and jot down what you hear. Finally ask yourself: *"How can I exercise this gift for the sake of God's kingdom?"* *"What might God be calling me to do right now."*

This brings us full circle as we have contemplated the three basic needs of all human beings for the past several weeks. The more we discover and identify our unique spiritual gifts, the better sense we will have of our God-given identity. And the more we live into our purpose by exercising our spiritual gifts for the "common good," the more we will experience a sense of belonging. IDENTITY, BELONGING, PURPOSE – these are not three independent realities but a tapestry that are interwoven within each other. As we grow in Christ and in Christian community, all three will take on a reality that is both mystical and wonderful.

Hymn of the Day: *We All Are One in Mission* (ELW 576)