

## **“Celebrating OUR Ministry”**

2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 1 Corinthians 12:4-26

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Several years ago, in my role on the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry, I worked with a few congregations that had run into some problems. Sometimes this had to do with someone or some group that was doing something out of line with Presbyterian polity. As I worked with the session to address the particular issue, I found I also had to deal with a generalized resentment toward the Presbytery. Because the session felt that it had lost control of the church, I found myself reminding them: “This is your church.”

Strictly speaking, that's not really true. At least, it's not good reformed theology. Our constitution tells us that “Jesus Christ is head of the church.” Whatever the vision and values of a congregation, they should reflect the leadership's attempt to follow Christ.

This is what Paul is telling the church in Corinth. It is a gifted, service oriented, and active congregation. But they, or some of them, value some gifts over others, think certain services are more important than others, and consider certain individuals more essential to the future of the faith community. It is the Spirit that gives gifts and not for the purpose of raising one person's importance over another. It is the Lord who inspires service and not for the purpose of emphasizing one ministry over another. It is God who moves the church to act in the world and not for the purpose of seeking its own glory. The Spirit gives “to each... for the common good” (v. 7).

As Janet mentioned last week, when we talk about *celebrating* our ministry, we are talking about the things that God has done among us. It's so important when we talk about the faith community that we include God not only as part of, but also source of that community. “Our” means us and God.

Having acknowledged that God stands at the center of the faith community, I want to talk about “our” church, what that word means and what it doesn't mean. First, there are leaders in community, but there is no hierarchy. If you have been called to service as an elder, you are not more important than a deacon, a staff person, a song leader, liturgist, children and worship leader, coffee plus server or greeter. “There are varieties of service but the same Lord.... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” However we serve, we build community.

“There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them.” Whether you participate in Bible Study, sing in the choir, or set the tables for the picnic, God is equally at work in you. Whatever activity we participate in, we build community. “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.” Whether you preach, teach, pray, heal, or comfort, your gifts do not deserve more honor than another's. All of these things, participating in the life of the church, serving others, and using our gifts are important. They contribute to each person's sense of belonging. That belonging gets whittled away

when we elevate one person's contribution over another's. When people walk away from a congregation, part of what they're feeling is a loss of ownership. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Second, healthy faith communities are inclusive, not tribal. This is not to say that anything goes or that all ideas are welcome, but Paul is very clear that differences make a community stronger. If Paul had written more bluntly, we would understand that he wanted the church at Corinth to stop excluding the uneducated, the seemingly less spiritual, and the poor. We shouldn't look down on those whose conscience appears weak or treat slaves as lesser members. The church has no business excluding women from leadership, regarding LGBTQ persons as sinners, abhorrent to God. Welcoming the stranger, loving the neighbor, and hospitality are core aspects of the church's ministry. We do not come to worship to escape the world, but to refresh our faith and equip ourselves for ministry beyond our walls. The church operates from a vision of God's love for all people.

Third, the church tends the vulnerable in its midst. "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable," writes Paul. I think of Mary, whom I saw last week in the Health Center at Friendship Village. At 92, wheelchair bound, and struggling to complete a sentence, I feel her pain, but I also hear her witness. She is always working on something in her mind. For her, faith is about being useful to the community in which she finds herself.

I also think about how important it is that children find a place of welcome in the sanctuary. I think about the folks who participate virtually in worship. Our most regular attenders join us on-line. I think about those who feel their contributions are small and yet how essential they are to the shape of ministry in this congregation.

Fourth, the church shares in the joys and sufferings of its members. We rejoice together and we grieve together. We are never alone whatever our state of mind might be. Every week concerns and joys are sent to the faith community. Our deacons pray for and respond in practical ways to the needs of their parish. It matters to me that so many of you continue to ask about my brother after his heart surgery. I know that I am not alone.

These are just a few of the things that make up *our* ministry. As we celebrate our ministry, we recognize the God of love at the center of our community. We acknowledge the importance of each person, welcome new people to our ministry, guard the dignity of each person, and share in the lives of one another. "We have this treasure in clay jars..." writes Paul in his second letter reminding us both of the frailty of human beings and the treasure entrusted to us by God. What a privilege to say "our" ministry, to be about the sharing of God's love with the world and toward one another. It would be daunting, indeed, to do this alone; but we don't. We do it together. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, head of the church and friend in ministry. Amen.