

SERMON TITLE: "Renewing Our Resolutions: Service"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 4:1-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 23, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many of you know that David Barron works at Weber Human Services. Because of a recent conversation David had there, one of his co-workers contacted our church. She was hoping we would put up a flyer and help publicize the need for senior volunteers. She's looking for volunteers to serve as companions to other senior citizens, to serve as foster grandparents to children, and to serve in our community's many different helping agencies. The flyer she sent had a graphic that said, "Doing good is good for you." It indicated that volunteering "reduces depression, chronic pain, stress, risk of disease, and social isolation." According to the flyer, volunteering also "increases physical fitness, mental function, sense of purpose, social connection, and longevity."

Those are all great reasons for retirees to call up Weber Human Services and volunteer. Even when our age causes us to put the M-F, 8-5 responsibilities of our jobs and careers behind us, we still have many talents, knowledge, and skills to offer. Of course, that isn't news that has to come to us from Weber Human Services. We in the church have long known that service is an important part of our life together in the body of Christ. Like prayers, presence, and financial gifts—which we have discussed over the past three weeks—service is one of the vows we make when we join a United Methodist church. So, as we continue our series on "Renewing Our Resolutions," I invite you to delve with me into Ephesians, chapter four, and see what we can learn about service.

1—WE ARE CALLED TO UNITE WITH SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES

If we were called to be rugged individualist Lone Rangers, service wouldn't make much sense. But we United Methodist Christians know that we are called to unite with something bigger than ourselves. We see this in the first several verses of Ephesians 4. The Apostle Paul, or someone writing

in the tradition of Paul, urged his readers “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which [they had] been called.” He indicated that this calling is to a unity of “one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all.”

Do you hear how powerful and uniting that call to service is? This isn’t just me taking care of myself. Nor is it some small, insignificant job or something that doesn’t matter. This isn’t busy work or a mundane duty. This service is really important. This is something much bigger than our individual selves, our family unit, or our particular congregation. This calling is even bigger and more important than a large community agency that seeks our volunteer efforts. This service is even more encompassing than the needs and interests of our country. This calling is to the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. This calling is to serve the purposes of the one God of the whole world.

When I was a young person, it was the greatness of this calling that appealed to me. I started attending church and learning about God when I was in the sixth grade. My friend Kelly invited me to go with her, and her family picked me up every Sunday morning for years. It was their faithfulness in attendance and service that enabled me to come to my own relationship with Jesus Christ. At that church, I saw others—Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, musicians, and more—who selflessly gave of their time and talents and invited me into that life of service with them. When I eventually heard God’s call on my heart to become a professional minister, I didn’t do it with the idea that I was alone. I was inspired to accept God’s calling because it allowed me to unite myself with the great body of Christ that was making a huge difference in people’s lives. I understood that spiritual things were eternal and of ultimate importance. Serving God in and through the church was significant. It was strong. Whether we are an ordained minister or a lay volunteer, we serve because we know that our service is united to something much bigger than ourselves.

2—SERVICE FREES US FROM CAPTIVITY

A second, and closely related, reason we United Methodists might want to renew our resolution of service is that such participation frees us from captivity. We see this in Ephesians 4:8-10. The writer is referencing a passage from the Old Testament to explain that, when God came to earth in the human flesh of Jesus, God experienced our human limitations and captivities. But when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, God abolished those chains that bind us. As a people of resurrection faith, we are no longer imprisoned by human weaknesses and limitations. No longer do we need to be afraid and insecure. No longer do we need to hold back in timidity. No longer do we have to listen to those old putdowns and abusive words that kept us frozen. Through Jesus Christ, our captivity has been taken captive, and we are now free to be and do all that God has called us to be and do.

I feel very fortunate that my childhood was never scarred by hurtful words or abusive actions. I don't recall any time when I was ever put in a situation where I felt afraid of significant adults in my life. At the same time, however, my parents came from families of very modest means. Even though both my father and mother had many relatives in our hometown, none of my relatives had much social confidence or political clout. So, unlike some of my classmates, whose parents had more financial means and more community standing, I felt some pretty tight constraints in regard to what I could do among my peers. I was the girl who was absolutely mortified when I had to stand in front of the class to give an oral book report.

But my relationship with Jesus Christ did a lot to change that for me. As a young teenager, I was given a poster that I hung up on the wall of my bedroom. I can still remember that it was black with rainbow colored words that spelled out Romans 8:38. It said, "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." I also learned Philippians 4:13, which says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." As a youth and

young adult, I took those verses very personally. They freed me from captivity, so that I could serve God's people. Am I completely free now? Of course not. As long as we live in these bodies of human flesh and bones, we will be limited and captive to some extent. But I have felt that captivity loosen significantly as I have embraced my calling to participate in God's service.

Over the years, I've heard other stories of freedom from captivity. I've heard people tell me that they were once captive to their physical ailments, grief, or obsessions until they finally reached out to help someone who was worse off than they were. When they began focusing their attention on someone else's needs, when they began volunteering, when they began doing the important work of God, then their bodies and their minds felt much better. Their spirits improved, and they gained a sense of wholeness. I know, I know. Sometimes the question of "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" is a real one. All I can say is that we United Methodists are called to service, and when we resolve to do that, God is able to free us from a lot of what holds us captive.

3—WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN GIFTS NEEDED BY THE BODY

I've left until now what probably seems the most obvious about our United Methodist vow of service. We've been given many different spiritual gifts that are needed by the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11 mentions that some had been given spiritual gifts so they could serve as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers." All we have to do is look around our congregation to know that God also gives spiritual gifts of hospitality, making music, gardening and beekeeping, video technology, teaching children and youth, lighting candles, administering our finances, reading liturgy, beekeeping, calling and praying for the sick, sending cards to shut-ins, cleaning restrooms, vacuuming carpets, leading and participating in mission projects, maintaining our yard and building, and so much more.

We're given these gifts by God's Holy Spirit so that we can build up and strengthen the body of Christ and then reach out in service to the community and the world. These gifts, these talents, these

skills and interests are given because they're needed. They aren't meant to be hoarded. They're meant to be shared.

These abilities have been given so that we'll put them to work in the right proportions so that the body can be healthy. Some of you who've had a bad knee know what happens when one part of your body isn't working well and another part has to overwork to make up for it. Yep. Your hips and back start hurting too. Well, in the body of Christ, it's the same. You might think that you could leave out your part and no one would notice, but we aren't doing these tasks alone. We're part of a whole system that needs every one of us to function well, so that no one gets overworked and hurt. Our service is part of a much bigger operation. So, if you're sitting there scratching your head about what kind of service you could do, I hope you'll tell me. I'd be very happy to help match your abilities and interests with an opportunity for service!

CONCLUSION

One of the songs in *The Faith We Sing* hymnal is called "The Servant Song." The first verse goes like this:

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.
Let me be your servant;
let me be your servant;
let me be as Christ to you. (#2222, by Richard Gillard)

This is a good song and prayer for United Methodists. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Christ has freed us from our captivities and limitations. And the Holy Spirit has empowered us with many skills and talents. Now it's time to utilize those abilities God has given us for the good of the congregation and the world. As we begin this New Year of 2022, let's renew our resolution of service.