

SERMON TITLE: "What's It Mean to Be a United Methodist? Service"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 20:25-28 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-31
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 1, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

For the past three weeks, we've been thinking about what it means to be a United Methodist Christian. While there are probably hundreds of ways you could approach that identity question, we've been looking at it from the perspective of some promises we make when we join a United Methodist congregation. Whenever someone becomes a member of a United Methodist church, they vow to uphold that congregation by their "prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness." Having already discussed prayers, presence, and financial gifts, today we move on to the topic of service.

In the gospels, the disciples and others were regularly trying to figure out what Jesus' identity was. When they got overly excited about how glorious Jesus' kingdom might be, and what kind of exalted role they might have in it, Jesus had to set them straight and bring them down a notch. Jesus' own identity was characterized by sacrifice on behalf of others. As we saw in our unison reading from Matthew 20, those who want to be Jesus' followers must also claim this identity of service.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul emphasized the importance of service. This morning, I want us to delve into these verses and see if we can discover some of the reasons why we United Methodists so readily find our identity in service.

1—OUR SERVICE IS EMPOWERED BY GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

First of all, service makes sense to us United Methodists because we know that our service is empowered by God's Holy Spirit. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, whatever service is needed, whatever service is required, whatever service is beneficial—it's God's Holy Spirit who provides, allots, and activates those abilities.

Sometimes talents run in families. We've all seen that some families are more athletic. Others are more artistic or musical. Some families have a lot of brain power for math and science. Some families tend to produce public servants like teachers, police officers, or political leaders. Of course, children don't always follow in their parents' footsteps, and kids often give evidence of very different interests and talents. We could say that the distribution of these skills comes from a combination of nature, nurture, opportunity, and even self-discipline. And, for sure, those are powerful factors. But, as United Methodist Christians, we lean into the spiritual meaning of what Paul was writing to the Corinthians. No matter how we have gained our interests and abilities, we can trust that our gifts of service have been designated and distributed by God's Holy Spirit.

This divine origin of our abilities for service is powerful and affirming. If we truly believe our gifts come from the Holy Spirit, then we can't disparage, discount, or ignore them. Anything that comes to us as a gift from God has to be special, right? We might feel small, shy, and insignificant, but certainly God isn't. If we believe that our interests and skills are gifts from God, then we should never belittle ourselves or allow anyone else to devalue our contributions. God has given us these abilities because they are important, useful, and necessary in our life of service.

Conversely, if it's the Holy Spirit who determines the allocation of gifts, then there's no need for us to be ashamed that we can't carry a tune in a bucket or that repairing the plumbing isn't our cup of tea. Believing that our gifts of service come from the Holy Spirit means we can be appropriately proud of the contributions we *are* able to make while not worrying unnecessarily over what we can't do.

In 1997, I was pastor of a United Methodist church in a small town in Northeastern Colorado. One Sunday evening, we decided to take the youth and children to a roller-skating rink in a nearby town. I have never been very coordinated, so roller-skating wasn't my idea of a fun time. But, as pastor, I felt like I had to go and support the cause. I stayed off my skates as long as I thought I could get away with it. But then finally, I decided I had to go for a spin around the floor. I made a few shaky laps before disaster

occurred. A little boy fell right in front of me. If I had been a capable skater, I would have gone around him. But because I had no such skills, and I didn't want to run over the little guy, I fell instead and shattered my left wrist. I had to have surgery, and the surgeon put me back together with an external fixator and a bunch of pins and screws. It took months to heal and regain the motion in my hand. After that, I told people that "God had released me from the call to roller-skating ministry." It wasn't something that the Holy Spirit had gifted me with, and therefore, there was no need for me to do it ever again. If roller-skating leadership would be required in that church or any other, then someone else would have to provide that service—someone to whom the Holy Spirit had actually given that gift.

2—OUR SERVICE IS ACCOMPANIED BY OTHER MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY

And that, of course, leads us to a second important point about our United Methodist identity of service. We don't function alone. Our service is accompanied by other members of Christ's body. Those other members of Christ's body have also been empowered by the Holy Spirit. The variety of gifts is spread out among many people, so that—working together in the one body of Christ—we have the diversity of knowledge, perspectives, and talents necessary to carry out the ministry God asks us to do. As each one of us applies our particular skills in service to God and each other, we are collectively empowered to serve the church, the community, and the world.

Paul's description of the parts of a human body talking to each other about which one is more valuable reminds me of a story about a little puppy who *took a walk around his master's farm. When the puppy came to the stable, he heard the horse call to him. "You must be new here," the horse whinnied. "You will soon find out that the master loves me more than all the other animals because I carry large loads for him. I suspect that an animal of your size is of no value to him at all."*

The little dog hung his head and was about to walk away when he heard the cow in an adjoining stall. "I have the most honored position on the farm," said the cow, "because the lady makes butter and cheese from my milk. You, of course, provide nothing of value to the family."

“Cow, your position is no greater than mine,” baaed the sheep. “I lend the master wool to make his clothes. I provide warmth to the entire family. You are correct, however, about the puppy,” the sheep concluded. “He gives the master nothing.”

One by one the animals joined in the conversation, telling about their honored positions on the farm. The chicken [clucked] how she produced eggs, and the cat, famous for her quickness, [meowed that] she rid the house of mice. All the animals did agree on one thing: the little dog provided no service of value to the farm family.

Stung by the criticism of the other animals, the puppy found a secluded place away from the animals and began to wimper. An old dog heard the sobs and paused to listen to the little one tell his story. “They’re right,” the puppy sobbed. “I provide no service to anyone.”

“It’s true,” the old dog began, “that you’re too small to pull the wagon. And you’ll never produce eggs, milk, or wool. But it’s foolish to cry about what you can’t do. You must use the ability the Creator gave you to bring laughter and cheer.”

That night, when the master came home exhausted from long hours in the hot sun, the little puppy ran to him, licked his feet, and jumped into his arms. Falling to the ground, the farmer and puppy romped in the grass. Finally, holding him close to his chest and patting his head, the master said, “No matter how tired I am when I get home, I feel better when you greet me. I wouldn’t trade you for all the animals on the farm.”¹

Like the animals on the farm, we Christians have many different ways to be in service. None of us is unnecessary. All of us are helpful in serving as Christ’s hands and feet and heart in the world.

And, for most of us, at least, serving together in the company of others makes our service more interesting and fun. I’m pretty sure that most members of the choir would rather sing as a group than as a soloist. I know for a fact that the Bell Tones only function when there are enough ringers to play all of the different notes in a song.

When we gather at the church on Saturday, October 14, for the annual Fall Yard Work Day, we'll some will drive or push mowers, others will use hedge clippers or string trimmers, and yet others will pull weeds or use rakes. Depending on what skills are present, we might also blow out the sprinkler lines. Many of those tasks could be done by one or maybe two people on another day, but it's a lot more fun to do this service and celebrate together the accomplishment of preparing our property for the colder months ahead.

Later in October, at the Craft Fair, we'll have bakers, sewers, table transporters, decorators, kitchen staff, honey sellers, and cashiers. Working together, we'll have a successful event that will raise funds for five local mission organizations: the Lantern House homeless shelter, the YCC domestic violence shelter, Catholic Community Services food bank, the Ogden Rescue Mission, and Family Counseling Service. Through our United Methodist service together, we'll empower other agencies to provide necessary services to the community.

Then, on Saturday, November 4, our church will host the annual Veterans Tribute Run, in which we raise money for the Residents' Activity Fund at the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home. Volunteers will be needed to serve at the registration table, guide runners along the race route, and offer snacks at the finish line. Maybe some of you will even want to run the 5K race. Our service together that day will make it possible for us to provide some fun activities for those who risked their physical and mental health in service to our country.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, there are a variety of spiritual gifts, activities, and services. We followers of Jesus would be overwhelmed and defeated if we thought each one of us had to be experts and skillful at every type of service. Fortunately, we don't have to be good at everything. And we don't even have to do everything. What's expected of us as United Methodist Christians is that we acknowledge, receive, and

use whatever gifts have been given to us by the Holy Spirit and put those abilities to use in service to God and others.

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.²

That’s a good song and prayer for United Methodists. A large part of our identity comes from our service.

¹Adapted slightly from William R. White, “The Little Dog,” in *Stories for Telling* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 41f.

² “The Servant Song,” words and music by Richard Gillard, c. 1977 Scripture in Song (a div. of Integrity Music, Inc.).