

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4th Sunday after Epiphany
Year C

Duane M. Harris

January 31, 2016

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Title: "A United Methodist Path: Service"

This morning we continue the worship series on "A United Methodist Path" which has been focusing on the vows we take when we become a member of the United Methodist Church. When we do so we promise to do five things. We promise that we will support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness.

The first week dealt with prayer--the first promise--because it emphasizes our relationship with God, first and foremost. God is the beginning and the ending of who we are and why we are here and prayer is the spiritual practice that connects us with God through the Spirit.

The second week dealt with presence. It's the promise to show up, to intentionally be part of the life of the congregation as a group of imperfect people growing in our love for God and neighbor. Pastor Jaye talked about this in terms of a seed, planted in the ground, uncomfortable in an unfamiliar setting, but that's how growth happens. She talked about being part of a group of people working on their spiritual lives and how uncomfortable that can be for us but that's how we can grow in our spiritual lives. It's how John Wesley began the Methodist movement by forming small groups of people who met together for prayer, scripture reading, keeping each other accountable and then engaging in social action.

Last week dealt with financial gifts, remembering that all that we have is a gift of God and that we are called to give back to God a portion of what we have received. Wesley taught Methodist groups to "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."

This morning we turn to the promise to serve.

When I was serving in Owosso, I was a member of the Rotary Club. And every year there were fundraisers. As a member of the club along with everyone else, I donned an apron and helped serve a walleye dinner to the community. We folded silverware into napkins, put up decorations, spread table clothes on the tables in preparation for the big day. The day of the event we poured coffee, tea, water and milk, made sure each table had their serving dishes refilled when the Cole slaw ran out or the fish platter needed to be replenished. It was hard work, but we knew the money was going to a good cause. There were projects all around the community that bore the name of the Rotary Club: a pavilion in the local park, some benches along the river, things that members knew would create a nicer place to live. While I enjoyed doing it, it was different than serving through the church. It was a nice thing to do but I missed

the spiritual element, the deeper reason for serving was missing for me. I'm not saying it wasn't there, it just wasn't a part of the conversation.

So what is different about serving as a follower of Jesus? What makes serving as a member of a United Methodist congregation different from serving as a member of a service club or in some other capacity in the community? And why do we ask people to promise to be active in service when they join a congregation in the UMC?

To start with, one of the beautiful things about Jesus is his obvious enacted love for people who were vulnerable or disenfranchised or oppressed. He was accused of being a friend to sinners, a glutton and a drunkard because he associated with those not part of the faith community of the time. He found himself in hot water over and over again because he crossed boundaries others wouldn't cross, befriended people others wouldn't befriend, healed people they couldn't heal, offered mercy to sinners many would rather have stoned according to the law. Jesus served human beings, loved human beings, even the worst: betrayers and deniers and killers asking God to forgive those who killed him: "for they know not what they do," he said. He gave his life willingly rather than destroying those who were against him which he could have done had he chosen to do so. But Jesus was different: a foot washer, a healer, a boundary crosser in the best sense. He did not allow fear or self-righteousness to keep him from serving others. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners", he tells the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospel According to Mark when they accuse him of eating with the wrong crowd. He refused to be dissuaded from serving. His entire life modeled service to others as he taught the most important commandments were to love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves.

When John Wesley and his "Holy Club" fellows met together to help each other live holy lives, the end result of their scripture study and prayer led them to serve. They modeled Jesus' ongoing concern for the poor and the imprisoned. It wasn't just a Bible study that moved them toward living holy lives. It did not stop there. It was the vital piety of prayer, scripture reading and spiritual conversation paired with social action. They found that living a holy life meant serving others out of love for God.

That is one of the differences between serving through a service club and serving as a UM Christian. For us, serving is a response to God's desire for us to love God and God's call to love our neighbor. Serving is rooted in love as a response to God.

The letter to the Ephesians may well have been one of those passages the "Holy Club" shared together that prompted them to leave their Bible study and then serve the poor. As Paul writes to the congregation he begs them "to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." It's a calling to live a holy life.

According to Paul, living up to God's call has certain characteristics:

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4).

One of the practices of the Holy Club was to consistently engage in self-examination. From this passage questions might arise, questions that might be asked of each one of us. Ask yourself as I ask myself:

Have I been humble and gentle in seeking unity in the congregation?
Have I been patient?
Have I been able to love those with whom I disagree or those I dislike?
Have I made every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
Have I been living "...a life worthy of the calling to which ... [I] have been called"?

And just to be certain Paul's concern for unity was not missed, the word "one" is used seven times in verses 4 and 5:

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4).

The assumption here is that all are called and that the calling is from God "who is above all and through all and in all." Reminds me of Paul's preaching to the crowd in Athens in the book of Acts in which he says, 'In him we live and move and have our being'. (Acts 17:28). God is not distant from us but nearer than our own breath and this God of ours who has given us life has also called us because we are the body of Christ.

...we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Ephesians 4).

The first song we sang this morning, "If We Are the Body" is by a Christian group called Casting Crowns. It describes the experience of two people who come to worship but experience less than gracious hospitality from people in the church. Then in the chorus questions are asked in the style of Wesley's Holy Club practice of self-examination.

But if we are the body
Why aren't His arms reaching?
Why aren't His hands healing?
Why aren't His words teaching?
And if we are the body
Why aren't His feet going?
Why is His love not showing them there is a way?

There is a way

Jesus payed much too high a price
For us to pick and choose who should come
And we are the body of Christ

As the body of Christ, Paul writes that the Ephesians have been equipped:

...each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.⁸
...¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets,
some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the
work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... (Ephesians 4).

The truth is that everyone has been gifted by God. You have gifts that can be used for the work of ministry, spiritual gifts that can be utilized for the good of others, in love for others and for God. You may not have the gift of prophecy or healing or preaching or teaching. Maybe you have the gift of hospitality. You have a way with helping people feel at ease and welcome. Maybe you have the gift of craftsmanship. You're good with your hands and creating or repairing things that can be used for the ministry of loving God and neighbor. This is why when a person joins a UM congregation you are asked if you will promise to support the ministry of the congregation through service, to build up Christ's body which is the church.

In what ways are you living a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called as you serve? And are there ways in which you can grow in service?

I love Paul's metaphor in the letter to the Corinthians in which he describes the church as the body: hands, feet, eyes, ears. We function in different ways in the body because we have different gifts. How marvelous it is when we recognize that all of us are called to the same hope though we are different. How good it is when we honor and respect each other as we serve in the ways in which God calls us. That is my hope for us as we continue in this place to serve together loving God and neighbor and growing in our shared spiritual journey with the living Christ.