**Servants All**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 3:9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**February 12, 2017**

The story is told of the Indiana farm boy who didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life. He’d just graduated from high school and he was sitting on the front porch one night when he looked up in the sky and he saw the letters G P C. And he’s thinking, “GPC, GPC, what could that be about?” All of a sudden he shouted out, “Go Preach Christ! It’s a sign from heaven. God wants me to be a preacher!” So he enrolled in Bible College and got himself a student pastorate, and it was just…awful! He couldn’t preach worth a darn, he hated making pastoral calls, and by Christmas he’d quit his church and withdrawn from college and gone back home, more discouraged than ever. One day he was talking with a friend and he said, “I just don’t understand it. God gave me that sign of GPC, and I tried to do what God called me to do, but I failed at preaching and now I *really* don’t know what God wants me to do with my life!”

The friend thought for a moment and he said, “Did it ever occur to you that GPC means Go Plant Corn?”

There are varieties of callings. There are many forms of service. God calls one person to be a farmer and another to be an electrician. God equips one person to be skilled with computers and another person to be skilled with wood-working. There are engineers and accountants and entrepreneurs and teachers. But we’re all servants. In today’s text Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For we are God’s servants, working together.” All of us in the Church, we are servants all; according to the particular gifts that God has assigned to each of us. A lot of churches fall into the trap of thinking that we hire staff to do all the work so that the rest of us can be entertained on Sunday mornings. But that’s not the biblical model for being the Church. It’s not just the paid professionals who are servants; we are *all* servants. God has given particular gifts to each and every one of us. And those gifts are designed to be used, as we work together.

Paul brings out this message over and over again in his letters. Consider these words from 1 Corinthians 12: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:4-5). We are servants all; all of us servants of the one Lord. And there’s no such thing as, “My service or my gifts are more important than yours.”

We are all gifted. *You* are all gifted. Sometimes we think that only the skilled craftsman or the exceptional musician or the person with the great mind is gifted. And yes they are. But they’re not the only ones. *You* are gifted. God placed within you a particular set of gifts when you were being knit together in your mother’s womb. And God wants you to know, just as God wanted the Corinthians to know, what your gifts are. God wants you to put those gifts to good use as God’s servant.

The trouble with the Corinthians was that they were spiritual snobs. Some of them were very much aware of their *own* gifts, and they thought highly of their own gifts, but they looked down their noses at those who were differently gifted; as if they had *inferior* gifts. Kind of like the way that, years ago, the owner of a Cadillac might’ve looked with distain on the owner of a lowly Ford or Chevy. The Corinthians were perhaps more busy extoling the *virtues* of their particular gifts than they were in putting those gifts to good use. Those brainy people with intellectual gifts looked down on those who had especially warm hearts. The folks who had the gift of speaking in tongues looked down on those whose particular joy was helping to serve food. And it was because of this immature infighting that Paul said, “You’re acting like a bunch of babies. I’m going to feed you with milk because you’re not yet ready for solid food” (see 1 Corinthians 3:2).

*All* of the Corinthians were gifted servants. And so are all of you. The Greek word for servants is *diakonoi*, which can also be translated as *ministers*. Which is why our congregational life is divided into 6 *ministries*: Membership, Worship, Outreach, Education and Youth, Property and Stewardship, and Camp. To serve in one of these ministries is to fulfill your calling as a servant of God, according to the gifts that God has given you.

Now there are at least 3 aspects to being a servant, and they can be thought of as Invitation, Opportunity and Responsibility.

Servanthood is first of all an *invitation*. You are *invited* by God to put your spiritual gifts to good use. Now we think of an invitation as a joyous thing. We are invited to a party, or a wedding, or some other happy event. But being a servant feels more like a job. Being a servant sounds like hard work. So to be *invited* to be a servant may seem like a contradiction in terms. Sort of like being *invited* to go to the dentist.

But there can be joy in being a servant. For example, when we’re asked to take on a task in the church or the community, we might have one of two possible reactions. We might feel honored. There might be a certain joy in knowing that someone thinks I have the gifts to do this. There might be excitement about the challenge that lies ahead. It really does feel like an invitation. Or, we might respond in a very different way. However polite your words might be on the phone, you’re thinking to yourself, “Oh yuck! I don’t want to do that!!” It doesn’t feel like an invitation at all; it feels like a burden. But you know what, if your initial response is “Oh yuck,” that might be an indication that God is not calling you to that task. Now, I wouldn’t go with that initial gut sense alone. If someone asks you to serve, you need to think about it and pray about it and consult with someone whose judgment you trust. But I wouldn’t ignore that initial reaction. Because, when it’s *God* who’s calling you to serve, when you have the *gifts* for the job that you’re being offered, then that telephone call will feel more like an invitation than a burden. Being a servant can be a *joyous* thing.

I don’t know if we should laugh or cry at the way in which people in the Church are often recruited to take on some new job. If you’ve ever served on a nominating committee, you know the pitch: “Well, it’s just a *little* job, only one meeting a month, won’t take hardly any of your time at all.” But once you’ve said yes, then you find out all of the tasks that you’re expected to do *between* meetings. And you find yourself resenting the fact that you took on this job and maybe resenting the person who asked you to do it! But imagine what would happen if we took a more realistic approach to asking people to be servants: yes, we’d be more honest about the time and energy that one would be committing to, but we could also tell the person about the gifts that we see in them; the gifts that may indicate that it is in fact God who is inviting them to take on this task. But you can’t be just flattering that person. You have to sincerely believe that he or she has those gifts. And if you honestly *don’t* think that the person whom you’re inviting is gifted for the job, then you shouldn’t be asking in the first place! And if you don’t think that *you’ve* got the gifts for the job, then “No” is a perfectly good answer.

Servanthood is first of all an invitation. There should be joy in saying “Yes” to being a servant of God.

Being a servant is secondly an *opportunity*: an opportunity to do good work, an opportunity to receive a reward, an opportunity to advance God’s Kingdom and make our community, our nation, our world a better place. Paul says that each servant “will receive wages according to the labor of each.” The Greek word for wages can also be translated as *reward*. So Paul is not necessarily talking about financial compensation here. When you serve well, when you do a job well, there is a reward in your heart – a warm feeling right here – which is *at least* as valuable as getting paid. Being a servant is an opportunity for making the world a better place, and for being rewarded.

One day, years ago, when I was serving a church in Canada, I was in a rotten mood. I can’t remember why I was grouchy, but for some reason I was just having an *awful* day. “The heck with this ministry stuff; I want to go home and read a good book.” That was my attitude that day. And then I remembered that I’d volunteered to take a load of clothing to a refugee shelter. And it had to be done *that* day. Now I was *really* grouchy. But I’d made the commitment. So I loaded-up the church van with bag after bag of clothing, then I drove that van – a big, hunkin’ vehicle which I hated to drive – I drove that van clear across Toronto through heavy traffic, pulled up to the refugee shelter, unloaded all those clothes, drove the van back across town through even *heavier* traffic, parked it in front of the church, got out of the van, and by the time I was done, I felt…wonderful! Being a servant is an opportunity: to do good in the world and to receive a great reward.

The reward is not necessarily financial, but it *may* be financial. When you can provide a needed service *and* get paid for it, that’s pretty cool. Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we celebrate today, Lincoln discovered that reward for servanthood when he was a teenager, down in Spencer County. In those days the steamboats on the Ohio River would stop in the middle of the river to pick-up passengers. So the enterprising young Mr. Lincoln built a raft and rowed people out to the steamboats for a modest fee. Trouble was, there was a ferry service that took people from Spencer County across the river to Kentucky, and the guy who ran that service sued Lincoln, claiming that the State of Indiana had granted him an exclusive license to operate a ferry across the Ohio, and Lincoln was infringing upon his franchise. Well, the Lincolns couldn’t afford a lawyer, so young Abe defended himself. He said to the judge, “Your Honor, I haven’t been running a ferry across the Ohio, I haven’t been taking people across the river at all; I’ve been taking them to the *middle* of the river.” The judge bought the argument and Lincoln won the case. He continued to offer a needed service, and he continued to be rewarded for doing so. Servanthood is both an invitation and an opportunity.

But it is *also* a *responsibility*. And responsibilities aren’t always fun. When you’ve committed yourself to being a servant, you can’t give-up, even when the going gets rough. You might be gifted for a task, there might be rewards associated with that task, but it’s not going to be a joy all the time. You see, Paul enjoyed preaching the Gospel and planting new churches. You can see that joy in his letter to the Philippians. He deeply loved those folks! But his servant ministry of preaching and planting hit a huge snag in Corinth, where some of the people didn’t particularly like him and they rebelled against his leadership. And Paul gets a little angry at them. He gets even more angry at the Galatians. But he still loves them. He still writes to them. He still serves God by serving them. Even when he gets thrown into prison, he doesn’t give-up, because servanthood is a responsibility and a commitment that you don’t just walk away from if you’re a Christian. Even in jail he doesn’t abandon his servant calling, because he knows that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him (see Philippians 4:13). And so can we.

St. Valentine was a 3rd century priest in Roman-occupied Europe. A servant of God who loved to perform weddings, including marrying Roman soldiers to their sweethearts, he got in trouble when the Roman Emperor, Claudius II, decreed that solders must remain single because it made them better warriors. If you’re not worrying about leaving behind a widow and kids, you’re more likely to take risks on the battlefield. So reasoned the Emperor. But Valentine recognized both the sacramental nature of marriage and his calling as a servant of God to perform that sacrament, even if the groom was a Roman soldier. So he continued to perform such weddings – he engaged in an act of civil disobedience – and eventually he was arrested and killed. February 14th was the day when he was martyred. Thus St. Valentine’s Day reminds us, among other things, that being a servant is a responsibility: we have to stick with it, even when the going gets rough; even when it draws us out of our comfort zones; even when it puts us at risk.

We are servants all. We all have a role to play in the great drama of history, according to the particular gifts that God has given to each of us. “For we are God’s servants, working together.” It is a responsibility, yes; but it is also an opportunity and a joy. The rewards are great indeed. As Paul says, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give-up” (Galatians 6:9). And why should anyone give-up? With God, you see, all things are possible. Amen.