

You Belong: 2. Serving
1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-7
August 11, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

Amanda and I have two children, and we've had them for three and a half decades. Last week, as I sat down to go through our finances and pay a few of our bills, I began thinking about the return on our investment. From the beginning the flow of resources has been mostly one way, and Amanda could tell you that for one of our children the delivery process was not easy. It wasn't easy for me either. I was coaching and got so exhausted that I went home and took a nap before returning for the rest of the delivery. And then as our children were growing up, we invested time and energy and resources, and they were happy to take and take and take. They left home and then came back and left home and then came back and the flow of resources is mostly one way. I know you're thinking – but Steve, you have a grandson (have I told you about my grandson?) – isn't a grandson a return on your investment? Maybe, but I'm already learning that a grandchild increases the outflow of resources. We do get a card or present now and then, but the financial return on our investment has been very low. I've been married since 1982, and I'm not sure what my ROI has been in this marriage. I'll do stuff around the house without being asked, and no one leaves me a thank you note.

If I'm using a balance sheet to measure family life, I think you all would tell me that's not how family life really works. If you enter into family as a consumer would, it will always frustrate you. Family is not about getting but it's about giving. It's what I say in every wedding message – if you enter marriage thinking about all you will be getting, you will be disappointed and sometimes to the point of looking for a way out. Marriage is not about getting. It's about giving – a commitment to serving one person above all others no matter what. It is in giving that you receive the gift. The first time a baby smiles at you or you go to a party and you notice your spouse across the room and suddenly your heart is filled with love and gratitude and you say, "I love you even more today than I did 37 years ago."

Just think if God had a balance sheet, looking for a "return on investment" when God sent Jesus into the world. Jesus lived 33 years and only the final 3 were devoted on God's mission to the world. And in those 3 years, Jesus was rejected, ridiculed, followed by only a handful of people and even they ended up betraying, denying, and then hiding. Even after God raised Jesus from the dead, his followers went back to fishing. At first look, there seemed to be no return – no results. But two thousand years later, here we are. That's huge!

God has gifted you, but are you using your gifts? My mom has this large china cabinet in her dining room. It holds all sorts of dishes that I might see on a table once a year. It also holds dishes that I've never seen on the table. A few years ago, my sisters and I were having dinner with her and the subject of the china cabinet came up and what would happen to all the dishes when she dies. I said, we could take it all to Good Will, maybe someone there could use it. But then she pointed to a cup and said, but that belonged to your great grandfather and she pointed to another and said that belonged to your great grandmother. And I thought, if we don't use them, what good are they. We might as well get rid of them. Which is why my sisters will inherit all the china... But how sad to have gifts and never use them.

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christian in the city of Corinth. Remember, Paul had once been the leader in the effort to eliminate the followers of Jesus, to put an end to the Christianity and the way it was perverting Judaism. But one day, as Paul was on his way to persecute and kill Christians he was struck blind along the side of a road when he experienced the risen Christ.

And as a result, Paul went from persecutor of Christians to spreading the life-changing message that God raised Jesus from the dead. Everywhere he went, he started churches. People heard the message and wanted to be part of the movement. But they often had trouble getting along with each other. Some in the church in Corinth thought they were superior to others because they were more spiritual. And here's what Paul said: **Brothers and sisters, I don't want you to be ignorant about spiritual gifts.** (1 Corinthians 12:1) Don't be ignorant. He's saying, you don't understand You have a gift (far greater than a set of dishes), and it has been given to you by the Holy Spirit, but it is your responsibility to identify it, claim it, and use it. And to go to your grave without using it would be tragic.

This is a series in which we are looking at what it means to belong to God's family. There are five basic values in this family. Last week, we looked at belonging. This week's value is serving. God doesn't just want you to go to church, God created you to serve. You were made by God to do something. **There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.** (1 Corinthians 12:4-6) In recent years bucket lists have become popular, but the real bucket list is not trips you will take or places you will visit, but the service that you will offer and the lives you will impact. God made you to do that in a unique way by gifting you through the Holy Spirit. If you are a follower of Jesus, then the Holy Spirit is in your life and the Holy Spirit has given you gifts that are to be used and a lot of people go to their grave without using the greatest gifts God gave.

A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7) Paul's point to the Corinthian followers of Jesus and to all of us is that God has a plan. It's called the church, to be led by persons who given the gift of leadership, to be shepherded by people who have gift, to be taught by people who have the gift, to be hosted by people with the gift of hospitality and on and on and on. There is no plan B. The church is to operate according to spiritual gifts, and everyone is needed because everyone has a gift. But what sometimes happens is that a church can slip into a two-tiered system where the church hires ministers and staff to do the ministry. In 1982, I was sent to Duluth to be the pastor of two small churches – sadly neither one exists today – and I think they don't exist anymore in part because they assumed I was the minister. I organized the Sunday School, I led the youth group, I planned the worship, I preached the sermon, I visited the sick, I taught the bible studies, I mowed the lawn, and often I was cleaning the church. I did it all – and as a young guy right out of school, I was happy to do it all. And what did the people in the church do? They watched me do the ministry. That's not the church. God has gifted everyone for a purpose – for the common good. And the best way to find your gift is to start serving and see how effectively God has equipped you.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul put it this way **Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourself.** (Philippians 2:3) Serving is not about elevating self – it's for the common good. Indra Nooyi was born into a culture that discouraged women from realizing their full potential. But every night her mother asked Indra and her sister to write a speech as if they were campaigning to be a world leader – president or prime minister. And then their mother would vote for the one who gave the more compelling speech. That daughter would be given a certificate proclaiming her the leader for that day. Indra grew up believing she would do great things and she did. One day she was voted president of Pepsico. She retired a year ago after serving 12 years as president of Pepsico.

On the day that she was voted president of Pepsico, her mother was visiting from India. Indra came home earlier than usual so she could share the news with her mother. As she came into

the house, she said, "Mom, I have great news." And her mom said, "Your news can wait. The house is out of milk. You need to go out and get some milk." Why don't you ask Raj, my husband? And she said, "I'm not his mother. I'm your mother." So Indra went to the store and bought the milk and when she got home she was fuming. "I hope you're happy now. I had some great news. I've just been named the president of Pepsico. I was going to tell you all about it but oh no, you needed milk!" As she tells this story in a magazine interview that I read last week, Indra says her mom responded by saying, "When you come home, you are mother, wife, and daughter just like your husband is father, husband, son. No one else can take your place. So when you come home, leave your crown in the garage."

I like that. When you come home, leave your crown in the garage. Here's what the apostle Paul said: **Though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit, but he emptied himself...** (Philippians 2:6) He humbled himself. He left his crown in the garage and became a servant. He got the milk. Serving is not about me. It's what God can do through me.

The church is the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus on earth. I don't take that lightly. We all need each other. The body must work together. **If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body?"** (1 Corinthians 12:15-16) No one says, I have a terrible headache but my back feels terrific! A body is a unity and if the head aches or the back aches or a leg breaks, the whole body suffers. What part of the body are you? Mouth. Ears. Hands or feet. Maybe a heart of courage. What do we call an organism that lives off the body, takes nourishment from the body and doesn't contribute to it? We call that a parasite. Nobody wants to be that. Paul never called anyone that. We are the body. There are no useless body parts, no person who are not needed. If you are here, you are needed. This is the place where nobody sits in the bleachers, but everyone is in the game. Don't go to your grave without using your gift. Leave your crown in the garage. Go get the milk.

I love being part of this church, where one of our family values is serving. Every week it seems there are people deployed to serve – right here among us, out into the community, and even to the other side of the world. And not for ourselves. From years of watching detective and police shows on television, I've learned one thing: I cannot go anywhere without leaving behind some evidence that I was there. Most people leave their own fingerprints. Those of us who call ourselves Christian are called to leave the fingerprint of Jesus Christ wherever we go. God gave us gifts to do something. And that's the purpose for which you belong.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 11, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, always compassionate and filled with love, we come to you with heavy hearts. We are tired and worn out because of the hurts of this world. Move us from fear and hopelessness to a fresh vision of what you would have us be. Renew our hearts and minds. Let your steadfast and forgiving love be born in us once more, as we hear your call to serve through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, August 12

Scripture: Lamentations 3:17-26

I've rejected peace; I've forgotten what is good. I thought: My future is gone, as well as my hope from the LORD. The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison. I can't

help but remember and am depressed. I call all this to mind—therefore, I will wait. Certainly the faithful love of the LORD hasn't ended; certainly God's compassion isn't through! They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness. I think: The LORD is my portion! Therefore, I'll wait for him. The LORD is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks him. It's good to wait in silence for the LORD's deliverance.

Observation: This passage came from Jerusalem after Babylon's army tore down its walls, the Temple, and most of its homes in 587 BC. Amid that wreckage (think of Ground Zero on 9/11 or the devastation experienced at the site of any of the recent mass shootings) the writer of Lamentations voiced gritty trust in God's faithfulness: "I have hope....great is your faithfulness." Whatever our challenges, we too can count on God's faithfulness to bring us through whatever we experience.

Application: Most often it's times of crushing pain, disappointment, and loss that tempt us to give up faith in God. It's all too human to think, "How could a good God let this happen?" But as this passage says, it is precisely when all hope seems gone that God is our source of ultimate hope. What does "God's faithfulness" mean to you (since it clearly doesn't mean God shields us from all pain)? When was it hardest for you to hold onto hope?

Prayer: God of grace and mercy, thank you for your faithfulness to me. Even when I have been ready to give up on you, you have never given up on me. Great is your faithfulness. Help me to keep the confidence that I find in scripture – that you are faithful. Help me to find comfort in your faithfulness. Amen.

Tuesday, August 13

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-29

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant's ability. Then he left on his journey. "After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. "Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, 'Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I've gained five more.' "His master replied, 'Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.' "The second servant also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I've gained two more.' "His master replied, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.' "Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, 'Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours.' "His master replied, 'You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven't sown and that I gather crops where I haven't spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don't have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them.

Observation: Three servants – two were called “good and faithful” and a third was fired. In Jesus’ story, the difference was not how much they had. The one with two bags of gold was as faithful as the one with five. Jesus said our faithfulness to God shows in our willingness to use whatever energy, time, skills, money or other assets we have to bless others and build God’s kingdom.

Application: One way that Messiah Church can deepen your walk with God is to create ways for you to join others in being faithful. There are serving opportunities posted each week at the Mission corner in the church atrium and at the “Make an Impact” page on our website. And many of our faith groups regularly participate in serving opportunities.

Prayer: Lord, I long to hear your words – “well done good and faithful servant.” I want to live as your follower. I know there will be struggles and challenges, but I want you to be proud of the way I have lived this day. Help me to see the opportunities before me to serve you by serving others. Amen.

Wednesday, August 14

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-10

Brothers and sisters, I don’t want you to be ignorant about spiritual gifts.

There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another.

Observation: Paul was responding to a question raised in a letter that he received from the newly-formed Christian community in the city of Corinth. Every member of the body of Christ (with Christ as the head, we are the body) has been given some spiritual gift that is an evidence of the Spirit’s working in their lives. All the gifts are intended to build up the members of the Christian community – for the “common good” and not for the purpose of personal advantage.

Application: In verses 8-10, Paul provides a list of some of the spiritual gifts that are given. Are you able to identify any of these gifts in yourself? If so, how have you or could you put that gift to work for the common good? If you do not identify with any of these specific gifts, what gifts or abilities do you possess that could benefit others?

Prayer: God, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit and the ways in which I sense your presence with me. Grant me the clarity I need to see the gifts that you have placed within me. Direct me in ways that I can serve your purposes in and through the church. Amen.

Thursday, August 15

Scripture: Philippians 4:1-5; Galatians 6:1-2

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Loved ones, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. Yes, and I’m also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled

together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life. Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near.

Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too. Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Observation: *Praus* is the Greek word Paul used for "gentleness." It did not mean "weakness" in any sense. It was used to describe, for instance, a powerful horse that had been "gentled" so his strength blessed people rather than hurting them. Paul seemed particularly concerned that this quality show itself at the times when people disagreed, or needed to correct another person.

Application: In his commentary, William Barclay wrote of *praus* that "There is gentleness in *praus*, but behind the gentleness is the strength of steel . . . It is not a spineless gentleness." Does it take greater inner strength to be gentle or to lash out and hurt those who frustrate you? When have you experienced this kind of gentleness in yourself or someone else?

Prayer: Strong and gentle God, give me the strength to be gentle as I speak and act. Grant me the patience to let go of frustration and let your Spirit flow freely within me. May others see in me your presence in me. Amen.

Friday, August 16

Scripture: Colossians 2:20-23

If you died with Christ to the way the world thinks and acts, why do you submit to rules and regulations as though you were living in the world? "Don't handle!" "Don't taste!" "Don't touch!" All these things cease to exist when they are used. Such rules are human commandments and teachings. They look like they are wise with this self-made religion and their self-denial by the harsh treatment of the body, but they are no help against indulging in selfish immoral behavior.

Observation: Some in the church of Colossae taught a strongly ascetic faith: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" It sounded wise, and drew many people. But it didn't work. Verse 23 is hard to translate (your Bible may have a footnoted option). It said either that human willpower alone can't make us the people God calls us to be, or that showy self-denial only feeds human pride. Either way, it reminds us that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not just a result of determination or will.

Application: If "gritting your teeth" and using your will to single-handedly stop doing bad things "lacks any value in restraining sensual indulgence," then how does it happen? In what ways have you seen the Spirit change your life "from the inside out"? How can self-denial become a way of trusting your own will rather than the Holy Spirit?

Prayer: God of wisdom, help me to know what I can control and what I cannot control. Give me the courage to face what is within my control and the strength to move forward trusting in your presence and grace. Amen.

Saturday, August 17

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-14, 22-23

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this.

Observation: God's call to a life of freedom was the spacious frame in which the apostle set the picture of the fruit of the Spirit. We could respond to a study of the Spirit's fruit by saying things like, "I've just gotta be more loving" or "I have to get a handle on self-control." But that just turns this into one more heavy burden of guilt for us to carry. The fruit of the Holy Spirit brings us, not more burdens, but freedom to live fully, because "against such things there is no law."

Application: When the Spirit is at work within you there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." In what ways have you seen one or more of these traits bring you greater freedom as the Spirit grows it in your life? What steps do you want to take during the rest of 2019 to cultivate the soil of your life so that the Spirit's fruit can grow more deeply, and bring you even more God-given freedom?

Prayer: Dear God, keep me within your love and grace. Help me to cultivate the seeds of the fruit that you would produce in my life. I want your Holy Spirit to flow in me always. Keep me connected to your will so that others may be influenced by what they see you are accomplishing in my life. In Jesus' name. Amen.