

Celebrating Ministry

Scripture: I Cor 12:4-6, 12-13; Phil 1:3-6

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Morning Service**

People of God: I wonder whether the kids are counting down the days to the end of the school year and the beginning of the summer holidays. Less than 15 days. Maybe the younger kids aren't doing a countdown, but I'm sure the high school students are, even though it means facing exams in just a short while.

For many students, as well as their teachers, the end of the school year is a reason to celebrate. Maybe not always for the best reason. But is good to celebrate the completion of another year of learning. And that's especially true for those who are graduating from either elementary school or high school. That's a milestone that truly does need to be celebrated.

As a church, it's also time to celebrate. That's what we seek to be doing today. We want to celebrate a year of ministry in the life of the church. We want to celebrate not that the church year is finished and we can rest for a couple of months (though it is important to have breaks from ministry in order to recharge your batteries). No we want to celebrate what we could have accomplished in this past year.

Now I suppose, we have being that in these last number of weeks, with GEMS and Cadets Sunday, as well as Friendship Sunday. But today, we want to celebrate all the programs of the church. We want to give thanks to the Lord for his blessings upon the ministry of this church.

To give thanks to the Lord for the nursery ministry and the 22 infants that were in there on Good Friday, for the Sunday School kids who could lead a Christmas program, despite having one practice cancelled because of freezing rain, for a GEMS program that could restart this year; for Cadets that could enjoy a wonderful day at the snow derby; for the youth mission trip to New York City; for our Friends who continue to teach us that it's

okay to clap along with certain songs as well as using hand gestures to them; for the wide variety of Bible studies—all of whom are self-run; for a new project of the Community Garden—for all of these ministries and so much more, we want to give thanks to the Lord.

We're doing this celebration of ministry on Pentecost Sunday. That's a very deliberate choice. Because it is Pentecost that allows us to celebrate the ministry of the church. Because it is only because of the outpouring of the Spirit on the church on the Day of Pentecost, that we are able to do the ministry of the Lord.

Now we should not think that the Spirit wasn't at work before Pentecost, because that wouldn't be true. The Spirit has been at work from the very beginning in the creation and with God's people in the OT. But at Pentecost, there was a new phase of the Spirit's work. As we were reminded last week, Jesus ascended into heaven so that he could unleash the Spirit upon the church so that the church could fulfill its specific task of making disciples of all people.

It is the Spirit who works in our lives so that we are able to be reconnected to God, worshipping and serving him. It is the Spirit who applies the work of Jesus Christ to us personally so that what Jesus accomplished on the cross and the empty grave can be ours forever. It is the Spirit who equips the church so that we can be the people God calls us to be.

Now much of this work of the Spirit is hidden and unseen—as the Spirit seeks to keep the focus on Jesus rather than himself. Much of this work of the Spirit is done through the ordinary and routine patterns of life—as the Spirit uses people and programs to instill faith in us, to stir us to good works, and to live a life of discipleship.

And so, a key part of the work of the Spirit is to equip all God's people for ministry. Now "ministry" isn't just what I do as a minister. That's sometimes how that phrase is used. And it is one way to describe my work. I am in the ministry. But so are you. We are all in the ministry of the church. We are all, in that sense, ministers. I may have a specific role and task within that broader ministry, but we cannot limit the ministry to just to what I do. Together, as a church, we have the ministry to carry out the mission and vision of the church—to fulfill the Great Commission—making disciples of all nations.

In order to fulfill this ministry, the Spirit equips us with gifts and abilities to do this work. Our reading from I Corinthians 12 is part of a larger section where Paul explains the gifts of the Spirit. Now there has been some controversy in the life of the church over some of these gifts. When some people think about the gifts of the Spirit, they immediately think of speaking

in tongues. They would never think of the act of serving coffee. But this second act is just as much a gift of the Spirit as the first one and if you understand Paul correctly, I think Paul would say serving coffee, as an act of hospitality and love, is far more important.

And so the phrase “the gifts of the Spirit” is not meant to be controversial nor confusing. It’s helpful then to see the parallel to gifts in verses 4 to 6 of I Corinthians 12: there are different kinds of gifts, there are different kinds of service, there are different kinds of working—three different phrases but they mean the same thing. At least, I can’t figure out the difference between gifts, service, and working in this context. Neither can the commentators. Instead, they all point to the same thing. We have been equipped by our Triune God to do the work of ministry.

Paul goes on to explain how this works itself out through the very familiar image of the body and its various parts. Christians are part of the one body—the church, with Christ as the head. We all form a part of that body. And we are to use our gifts and abilities in service of the body. Each member has his or her role. No part is too insignificant. No task is irrelevant. We all have our part to play in the ministry of the church.

Now it is, unfortunately, possible not to use our gifts for the ministry of the church. At times, circumstances make it impossible to fully utilize our gifts, as we would like. For example, a person who is sick or confined to a nursing home may not be able to use their gifts, as they were once able to. But in such cases, they are still a part of the body. They still have a role to play in the ministry of the church, as they become recipients of the ministry of others. In addition, they can teach us what it means to suffer, the importance of praying for the renewal of all things, as well as simply living in the grace of God. And so, every member has a part in the ministry of the church.

What’s sad and discouraging is when members don’t use their gifts for the benefit of the body, when they otherwise are fully able to do so. Perhaps they do even come to worship once in a while, but otherwise they don’t contribute to the life of the church—not even financially (which in some ways is the easiest way to contribute to the work of the church). Others neglect worship altogether. When that happens, the body as a whole suffers, as we miss their presence as well as the use of their gifts for ministry.

Anyhow, those thoughts are too negative. Today, we want to remain positive. Today, we want to celebrate ministry. Today, we want to thank the Lord for how people have contributed their time and their talents for the ministry of the church. The Spirit has equipped us for ministry and we have seen that ministry active and alive in this past ministry year.

Have you seen it? Have you experienced it? One of the blessings I have in my position is to be able to see, not just the visible and well-known work being done in the church, but I also get a glimpse into the work that is being done behind the scenes—and even then, I don't fully realize the amount of work and effort it took to get things done—like organizing the picnic after this service, or the work of the search committee for the Director of Youth and Young Adult ministries, or who weeded the community garden.

Sure there are areas of ministry that needs to be improved upon, sure there are opportunities for ministry that we can develop better, but still, we can give thanks to the Lord for that which has been accomplished. The Spirit is at work in this church. The Spirit has equipped us for ministry. Ministry has been done. Let's celebrate that fact. Let's give thanks to the Lord for that fact.

Paul, in his letters to the churches that he wrote, always has a section of thanksgiving at the beginning. There is only one glaring exception—the letter to the Galatians. But otherwise, Paul always thanks the Lord for the people in the church he was writing to. Our reading from Philippians is a good example of this. Paul thanks God for the people in Philippi and for their partnership in the gospel.

The work of the church is not a one-man show, as if I could even begin to do all the work that is possible in this congregation and in this community. Nor is it even a two-man show, if Joe will accept the position offered to him. Yes getting another staff member will help immensely in discipling our youth and young adults. But another staff person doesn't mean everyone else can slack off. No, together we are partners in the gospel. And we can give thanks to the Lord for this partnership.

We thank the Lord because he equips us by the Spirit for this ministry. But that does that mean we cannot thank and acknowledge the work of others? Yes, I think we can. Our thanks to others is done in the context of recognizing that it is God who enables us to do our work. And so we say to others: Thank you for using the gifts God has given you. Thank you for being used by the Lord. Jesus in the parable of the talents, said to the servants who used the Master's talents wisely: "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

That's what we want to say to each other today. Sure, we can mope around and lament the visits that could have been done but weren't. We can sulk about lost opportunities to impact the lives of others for Christ. But that negative spirit can blind us to the many positive things that have happened in this past year in the ministry of this church.

Let us give thanks to the Lord for the wide variety of gifts he has given his people here in Williamsburg. Let us rejoice in the different kinds of service that have been displayed again this year. Let us be grateful for the work that has been done.

From times of worship: with the gifts of music and preaching; from times of fellowship: with the gifts of hospitality and food; from times of education: with the gifts of teaching and modeling the faith; from times of administration, with gifts of organization and planning; from times of pastoral care, with gifts of visitation and prayer--let us celebrate the ministry of the Lord in this place at this time. Amen.