

February 8, 2015

2nd sermon in series on Generosity for Capital Campaign

“Impact of Ministry”

Today is the second sermon in a five-part series on generosity as part of our “Building to Serve” capital campaign. We do not use a series format that often in our tradition, but for our purposes in this campaign, I find it helpful. As I prepare these sermons and hopefully as you hear them, the goal is for us to recognize that God is doing something important among us and God is calling us to be part of that in big and little and even unexpected ways. It is exciting!

The theme last week was generosity and gratitude. I invited all of us to begin our day by being grateful for the blessings in our lives. This week I practiced that and then added a little spin—I also gave thanks for those people and situations that do not always inspire gratitude in me. As I did that this week, I found myself seeing the people and situations that usually annoy me in a different light. The truth is, God is doing wonderful and important things among us whether I like all the details or not.

This week our focus is generosity and ministry. At the end of the sermon today, we will do something a little unusual to help us realize the impact of the ministry of this church in our lives and the lives of others. Too often, we take for granted all the ways that ministry touches and transforms the lives of so many people. This sermon-- and what we do at the end of it-- is not so we can pat ourselves on the back; but rather to realize that God is working all around us and we can be part of it.

So what is ministry? For many of us, we think of ministry as the work of the clergy. We clergy get up front at church and do certain assigned things like preach or serve at the altar. Or we visit people in the hospital. Or we lead Bible studies and so forth. That is what we think of as ministry—and it is. But the work of the clergy is only a tiny fraction of the ministry that takes place in and through this church and throughout the world. If the church were dependent only on clergy for ministry, it would have died centuries ago.

No, ministry is much more than what the clergy do. To paraphrase what one wag said, “Ministry is one thirsty person telling another where the water is.” That phrase captures what true ministry is. We are a people who have received something that touched (and that continues to touch) our lives and that has brought healing to us. That dry place, deep in our souls, has received water. For some of us, it is a steady trickle that still brings life; for others, it is like a strong, flowing river. Regardless of how we experience it, we have received the living water of new life from God and we can’t help but share it with thirsty people.

So how do we do ministry? The Gospel for today gives us a range of examples of what ministry is. Jesus is of course our example. We find at times that his ministry is personal, one-on-one, with a friend's mother-in-law. Jesus' gift of healing breaks her fever and gives her the strength to get up and serve them. That is how ministry often works—quiet, behind the scenes, practical. Think of our coffee hosts and Hal Neal and all the people who provide the coffee and food we need so we can have times of fellowship.

Sometimes ministry takes place on a larger scale. The Gospel tells us that after healing Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus had the whole city coming to him and he healed wave after wave of people who had various needs and diseases. This ministry started at sundown and you get the sense it went on all night. How much could Jesus connect with the people who were coming to him? Did it feel like an assembly line? We don't know. But I imagine Jesus did take time at least to smile, or ask a question, or give a gentle touch to a hurting person. Think of the team of angels who gather, pack, and give out diapers, detergent, and other needed items every month at our Pantry. There is work that needs to get done, but I can tell you there is a personal connection that happens there with many of the people we help. That is ministry.

Sometimes ministry involves caring for ourselves. Many of the folks who are very involved in ministry are not always as good at taking care of themselves. They have received so much from God and feel the need to share and give back to folks in need. That's good—but it can lead to burnout. Again, we can look to Jesus as our example. After probably hours of ministry, Jesus took a break. After only a few hours of sleep, Jesus decided he needed some time away. He got up when it was still dark and went to a deserted place—no people in need, no demands to heal, just alone time with God in prayer. That practice revived him and gave Jesus the strength to carry on. For all of us in ministry, that type of break and renewal, centered on prayer and trust in God, gives us the inner strength we need to continue.

Beyond the example of our Lord, there is something else I have often found with people in ministry: many of us don't even realize we are doing it! You may tell me something like, "I don't have time to do anything at church; I am too busy with our young children... or too busy taking care of my aging father... or helping with my sister with special needs... or caring for my spouse with a serious illness." Believe it or not, these people are often *apologetic* because they can't do more at church. Let me tell you something—all those things I just listed (and more) are examples of important ministry in which you are taking part in transforming our world and being transformed yourselves as you do it. And often, as busy as these folks are, they still do other ministry—maybe a smile at a cashier at the store or reaching out to help someone who is going through what they are going through, too. That is ministry.

So if it is true that, "Ministry is one thirsty person telling another thirsty person where the water is," then how can we know if we are taking part in ministry? It is really two

things—realizing (and remembering) our own need; and then paying attention to the world around us so that we can help others in need. For Christians, ministry begins by first coming to God through our faith in Jesus Christ. Ministry begins by asking for forgiveness of our sins. Ministry begins by asking for what we need in life. And as we receive forgiveness and daily bread, ministry continues as we forgive and give to others as we have been forgiven and received so much. Ministry is always humble and humbling. Ministry is asking for God's help so we do not get distracted or angry or fearful and miss what is truly important in life. Ministry is such a great gift—always first to the person giving; and hopefully to the person receiving what we give.

As we take part in ministry, receiving then giving, there is a virtuous circle that makes us into generous givers. That water that has come into our souls revives us and then looks for a place to go. The ministry we receive and give connects us into a living, grace-filled system so that we are able to share with others the gifts we have received. We are able to give generously of our time, our effort, our abilities, and our money. We participate in the love of God in a way that transforms us all. It is really exciting to be a part of this!

Now everyone here has a story about how ministry has changed their lives. We have chosen a sample of folks with different stories to let us know the impact of ministry in their lives. Whatever good we all do, let us remember it is God at work here to heal us and then inspire and strengthen us to do the ministry God has given us to do. Amen.