

“Graced to Give”

Romans 12:3-8

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest June 6, 2021

Friends, the word “ordination,” which we are about to enact and celebrate this morning, means to be “set apart” for a special purpose in the fellowship of Christians and in the ministries and governance of the church.

According to Luke the Evangelist, after the resurrection of Jesus, the believers who remained together in Jerusalem shared a life of worship, fellowship, hospitality and prayer as they were being led by the disciples who had now become Apostles: called to preach the Gospel and teach Christ’s commandments, baptizing men, women and children into the Family of Christ.

As these “Followers of the Way” grew in number, as the Christians were originally named, it became clear that their life together needed the benefit of servant-leaders, dedicated caregivers, and sound preaching and teaching. Reflecting the ancient practices of Judaism, Elders or Presbyters were selected to exercise governance, and Deacons were appointed to provide caregiving and relief to the sick and impoverished—all under the guidance of the Apostles, including Saul of Tarsus who had become the Apostle Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus.

These three roles of Apostle, Elder and Deacon provided the structure for the expanding fellowships of Christian believers in the First Century, and are still practiced today in the churches of the Reformed Tradition, like First Pres. here in Lake Forest. “Presbyterian” means we are an Elder-led body: led by both Ruling and Teaching Elders elected by you, the Congregation (Kristie and I are Teaching Elders along with Don Dempsey, Peter Smith and Kent Kinney). Teaching Elders are also called Ministers of Word and Sacrament. We are not priests, as in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. We are servants--servants of God’s Word and custodians of Christ’s two Ordinances and Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When a Ministers are called to serve Congregations, they become Pastors, called to shepherd and pray for God’s people in their life of faith.

Elders, Deacon and Pastors are the three ordained leadership roles in the Presbyterian Church. But how are they to conduct themselves as leaders? Indeed, how are we all called to conduct ourselves as followers of Christ? This is the subject of today’s passage from the Apostle’s Letter to the Christian churches in Rome, and it is meant not for just Elders and Deacons but for all of us who together make up the Body of Christ.

Paul starts by stating his authority for saying these things: the grace given to him by Christ to become his Apostle. And the first thing he says is, “Do not think too highly of yourselves.” Think about who you are with “sober judgment,” according to the measure of your faith and not by what you think you know. Be modest. And be humble. When you do that, you will be first among the blessed, as Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Without humility, servant-leadership cannot work—in the church or state. We need the virtue of modesty. We cannot think too highly of ourselves.

The second teaching Paul sets forth is to understand that the fellowship of believers is meant to function like a human body in which each person is a member (including men, women and children) under the direction of the head of the body—Jesus Christ. Both here in Romans 12 and even more fully in First Corinthians 12, Paul stresses that we are called to a life together, an interdependent life where no one has all the gifts that the body needs to flourish, and no one can claim to be Christ’s follower alone and apart from one another.

Can your hand hold another without your heart? Can your legs climb that mountain without your lungs? Can your eyes see or your ears hear without your brain? We're not the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. We're members of each other who need and depend on each other. Even the humblest among us are indispensable for our spiritual health and wholeness. How can you live without your pancreas? How can you walk without your toes? How can you hold on to anything without your thumbs? Jesus was trying to teach us this when he said, "the least shall be greatest" in the kingdom of God, and "the last shall be first."

But do you really know the measure of grace that's been given to you?

God's gifts of grace begin with the gift of our living—a gift that we must expend each day of our lives—but also a gift that is being redeemed and renewed through our relationship of faith in Christ.

God's gifts of grace are the work of the Spirit in us, and these gifts differ according to the measure of our faith and our abilities. Gifts of grace are different from just "being gifted." They are used unselfishly to build up one another. They are meant for the common good.

A person, for example, might be gifted by having or making lots of money, like Andrew Carnegie or Bill and Melinda Gates. Setting aside the question of their faith, if these people had decided to simply amass their wealth for private and personal ends, they might resemble what Jesus said in his Parable of the Rich Fool. What does it look like to be "rich toward God?" Carnegie used his wealth to establish more than 2500 public libraries in dozens of nations, and today the Gates Foundation provides billions of dollars each year to address poverty, disease and inequity throughout the world. This is what happens when generosity is understood as a means of grace: the grace to give back.

Paul mentions other gifts of grace to be used for the common good such as preaching, teaching, serving, encouraging, leading, and caregiving. I love the last one: "God loves a cheerful caregiver!" Like Lukas, a professional caregiver from Poland who always has something cheerful to say to his 96 year old care-recipient and family—no matter how tough the day has been. Why? Because being cheerful makes the care-recipient feel valued as a person instead of being a burden or even worse—a waste of time.

Conclusion

The most powerful gifts of grace that build up the spiritual strength of the church community are not what you think they are. They won't be found in the strength of its mission, the quality of its worship or the power of its preaching. Remember what Jesus said about "the least shall be greatest?" Let me end with a story about my friend Neels DeConing, a gifted photographer with an eye for the unseen, a member (and Elder!) of Knox Presbyterian Church in Naperville who fell and broke his already-injured neck at home, waking up paralyzed on the floor to the cries of his wife Rene. He had broken his C2 vertebra—doctors refer to this as a "hangman's fracture"—it usually results in complete tetraplegia—the inability to move both arms and legs. Neels' tetraplegia was "incomplete." He could just wiggle his toes and feel touch on his limbs. After seven hours of surgery at NWM and ten days on a ventilator, Neels was transferred to Marianjoy in Wheaton for over ten months of intensive rehabilitation. "They kept hope alive," he said of the amazing people who work there. "If hope is alive, you will survive."

A tracheostomy gave Neels the ability to speak for the first time in weeks. "Am I in hospice?" he asked his wife. "No," she said. That was the moment Neels made the decision to start the long, hard journey toward rehabilitation. "I want to live," he said, but at the same time he had no idea what that meant. At first, he could only move his hand and foot. But a week later, they were able to help him stand. "I just started crying because I never thought that was possible."

Neels' gift of grace that built up the health and strength of his church family was his faith itself—and his extraordinary courage to risk hoping and believing in his physical recovery. It was truly a work of the Spirit, and Neels' ability to embrace the grace of receiving help was and continues to be a transformative gift he has given to his community by inspiring others to hope, trust in, and receive the support of the other members that make up the Body of Christ.

"If one members suffers, all members suffer together. If one member finds healing, all members rejoice together" (1Cor. 12:26)

That's how life is meant to be lived in the Body. "We are all related," as the Lakota Sioux say. *Mitakuye Oyasin*. And because each of us is related to Christ by reason of our faith, all of us are related one to another by expressions of our love.

And that is what servant-leadership in the church is really all about.