

"Discovering Your Ministry!"

Exodus 19:1-6
June 5, 2011

1 Corinthians 12:4-11
St. James UCC

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Linus was talking with Charlie Brown in the comic strip "Peanuts", and observed, "I guess it's wrong always to be worrying about tomorrow. Maybe we should think only about today." Charlie Brown replied, "No, that's giving up. I'm still hoping that yesterday will get better."

Some of us are Charlie Brown's when it comes to thinking about ourselves and about our own lives. We think that we have nothing special to offer, that there is nothing very valuable or precious about who we are and the talents and the abilities that we have.

That's pretty much how the Israelite people were feeling. It had been a powerful experience leaving Egypt and escaping the Egyptian army that pursued them. But, then they got into the routine of wandering through the wilderness. Life is pretty tough out in the wilderness. They were totally dependent on God for what they would eat and what they would drink. Camping out can be fun for a while, but imagine facing that prospect year after year with no home to call their own, and they didn't know when it would end. It seemed like this could just go on forever!

It was in the midst of all of those emotions that God spoke to them through Moses. Here God reminds the Israelite people how it was God who rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, leading them forth to a new way of life. Then God says to them, "Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own people. The whole earth is mine, but you will be my chosen people, a people dedicated to me alone, and you will serve me as priests."

This passage defined their relationship with God. The responsibility of the Israelite people was to obey God, to dedicate their lives to serving God, and in return God claimed them as God's own people, a nation of priests.

From that time forth the Israelite people looked back on that moment, passing the message on from one generation to the next. For their relationship with God, as described in this passage, defined who they were and how they should live. It gave them a national identity that was different from all others, and this identity bound them to each other and to God in a special way. There were many times when the people forget this identity, when they failed to live as a people who belonged to God. Inevitably those lapses caused them great grief and pain. They suffered because they were headed in the wrong direction, and always someone or something would happen to call them back to their real identity, so that once again they would know themselves to be God's people. They were special in God's sight, just as each one of us is today.

Time after time, prophets would arise to call the people back to their roots, to remind them that they were God's people, and that that relationship was indeed a central part of their identity. Once again the people would be reminded of and remember this passage from Exodus, and as they would start to identify themselves again as God's people, they would be renewed, for once again they were in touch with their essential identity. Once again, they saw themselves as they really were.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the members of the church in Corinth, they were a pretty messed up group. They were split into factions which had radically different ideas about how to go about living out the Christian faith. Not only did they differ on a whole range of issues, but those differences were being lived out in some very destructive ways.

To this church Paul wrote, "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all."

Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth - and us - that ministry is a gift that belongs to the whole church. We are all called to minister - to minister in different ways, with different gifts, but we are all called to ministry. The Church is a ministering community. Within this community, I have particular training and particular skills, I have been called to the ordained ministry - to preach, to teach, to marry, to bury the dead, etc., but each of you is called to particular ministries as well. Ministry is not restricted to a few individuals, it is the call to each of us.

We are all ministers. We have all been given gifts, and we have all been called by God to use these gifts for the common good - that is our ministry. Those ministries take place in many different settings, in many different occupations, and in many different ways. The point is that we all have a ministry that God has equipped us for, and we have all been called by God to use our gifts in the service of God.

One of the keys in Paul's message is a part that we often skip over. "There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service." God doesn't give gifts of talent to just some of us. When our turn came, God didn't look in the bag of gifts and say, "sorry, it's empty". As Paul says, "God gives ability to all", not just to some, but to all, and then he goes on to say, "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person" - not just in some people, but in each and every one of us.

Paul reminds us that not only have we all received gifts, but that the church is made up of the whole. We are each part of the body of Christ. We each come to this body with differing gifts and abilities, and that is healthy. One part is not more valuable than another. One gift ought not to set that person above others, for all the gifts come from God, and they are all special.

As we look at our graduates sitting here this morning, they have different gifts, different abilities. They also have different plans for the future, different visions of how they can best use the gifts that they have. They will be in different places this coming year, pursuing different opportunities,

and that is how it should be.

Then look around at the people sitting near you. Most, if not all of them, volunteer their gifts in various aspects of the life of our church. Each person has a variety of gifts. They differ from one to another, but each one has numerous gifts that God has given.

What could be more special than what God has done for us? What could be more special about us than the gifts and the opportunities that God has already given us, and indeed continues to give to us? The answer is that nothing could. We are each special people, and we are special not so much because of what we have done, but rather because of what God has done for us.

In all that God has blessed us with, God has reached out to us and offered us the chance to be part of a special relationship with our God. This is a relationship that nourishes us, cares for us, and helps us to use the special talents that God has given us - helps us to use them as God intends them to be used.

That's important for each of us to remember. As you look to different opportunities and challenges, always remember that you have a ministry that God has equipped you for. God loves you and will be with you as you walk into the future - and what could be more special and important about you than that?

Amen.