

THIS IS OUR SONG

4) The Song of Celebration

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In this series of sermons we have been thinking about the refrain from the beloved hymn, Blessed Assurance and the significance it holds for our life together. **We have reflected on the significance of our Story:** The story of the way God has been at work in the life of our congregation and in the greater story of our faith tradition.

We have also reflected upon the significance of our Song: That is the song that we sing in response to the story of the good news of God grace. We have, thus far, lifted up the song of service, the song of compassion and the song of generosity.

This morning, we put the final exclamation mark upon these messages that have invited us to think about who we are and what we are called to do and be. It is only appropriate, therefore, that we do so by sharing together in the song of celebration. For, when all is said and done, we have much to celebrate.

Every once in a while, it is important to step back and reflect upon the big picture of the ministry that we share and the great difference we are making in the lives of many—within our own community of faith and in both the local and global community of which we are a part. Sometimes, we can be so focused on the work meeting the challenge that is in front of us that we lose sight of the big picture of the difference we are making.

Today is a good day to do that. Not only are we consecrating our financial gifts that support of this ministry, but we are celebrating the many other gifts—the gifts of time and talent, the gifts of care and compassion, the gifts of love and service that we offer. And, in response to the tragic fires in the North Bay, we are also sharing the very tangible and edible gifts of non-perishable food items.

It is, when you stop to think about it, a pretty amazing network of caring, sharing and serving that links us together. In his letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to describe the nature of the body of Christ. When this body functions well, when its movements are fluid and well-coordinated, there is an interdependence among the various parts of the body. Hand and foot, eye and ear, arm and leg all working together—not for individual glory or honor—but for the greater good of the body itself.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage in “The Message.”

“You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you’re still one body. It’s exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then, we entered into a large and integrated life in which *he* has the final say in everything.”

When the Church is at its best, that is, when it is working under the direction of God’s Spirit, something remarkable happens! We “say good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives.” We no longer choose to think for independently. We no longer choose to “call our own shots.” And the reason is that we have “entered into a large and integrated life” that takes its direction from the One who has the final say in everything.

Now, you will notice that I said, “When the Church is at its best...” The truth is that we are not always at our best. The truth is that, sometimes, we can become petty and provincial. We can think, first and foremost, in terms of our own interest and our own desires. The truth is that we can become pretty fond of “calling our own shots.”

But, when we are at our best, we let go of our need to do that as we look for ways to share our gifts and passions with others for the greater good of all. It’s no longer about “me” and what I am doing. It’s about “us” and what we are doing together.

There is a story that comes from Zambia about a hunter who killed an elephant. He quickly called the other hunters who were with him to help with the work of cutting up the carcass for transport back to the village. As they were doing so, they sang a song about their elephant. They could not help but notice, however, that the hunter was singing a slightly different version of this song. To their dismay, he was singing about HIS elephant. So they quickly dropped their loads of elephant meat and starting walking back to the village, empty handed.

The hunter quickly realized his mistake and began singing about OUR elephant. The others then joined in, picked up their heavy loads and resumed their journey back to the village and the feast that they would share together.

It’s a powerful little parable that pointedly reminds us that when it comes to being the Church, it is not my elephant or your elephant. It is **OUR** elephant. The work of ministry is not something that we can accomplish on our own. It is something that we must share together if we are to be effective in our effort.

So, this morning, we are thinking about **OUR** elephant and the integrated ministry that we share. It is not possible, of course, to name all the names of those who share in this work and it would be a mistake to try. But it is possible to lift up and celebrate the various areas in which people choose to invest their time, their talent and their money.

I would like to offer a brief summary of the various ways in which the people of our congregation invest themselves and their resources.

There is, of course, the area of **WORSHIP** that occupies a central place in the life that we share together. Obviously, there are those whose work is very visible. There are the ushers, the musicians, the choir directors, the choirs, acolytes and the greeters. But there is also the important work of sound and visual technology, the work of bulletin preparers and folders, and the work of sanctuary cleaners, decorators and flower arrangers.

There is, of course, the important work of **WELCOME / HOSPITALITY**. This includes the investment made in our coffee hour fellowship and our greeting teams. Yet, when you stop to think about it, it also involves anyone who chooses move beyond their own comfort zone on a Sunday morning by returning a smile, extending a hand, and connecting with another who might happen to be a stranger.

There are those who **VOLUNTEER IN THE OFFICE** by answering phones, mailing letters, folding newsletters and doing whatever happens to need doing.

There are those who invest themselves and their gifts in the work of **TEACHING** classes and leading small groups.

There are those who serve this church through their passion for **SERVICE / SOCIAL JUSTICE**. They provide the opportunities to think and talk about the issues that challenge us and the specific ways in which we can respond to those challenges. They organize mission trips, fund raising opportunities, food drives and homeless ministries—to name but a few of the efforts.

There are those who are invested in the **MINISTRY OF CARING** that often takes place behind the scenes. There are those who prepare meals, make visits, send notes, provide rides and do whatever is needed to reach out and touch the lives of those who simply have a need.

There are those who invest themselves in the care of our **CAMPUS AND FACILITIES**. They are passionate about their stewardship and tireless in their efforts to make our campus a warm and hospitable place. As you know, the Sod Busters, the Board of Trustees and, of course, Boyd and Brian are on the front lines of this ongoing work. There are, of course, others who have contributed greatly to the financial support of this work as well.

There are those who invest their time and energy in the work of our **COMMITTEES AND BOARDS**. While these positions often operate “behind the scenes” with little fanfare and attention, the truth is that our church could not run without them. They help us translate our ideas into action, our hopes and aspirations into concrete acts of service and ministry.

Finally, I would like to reference a new addition to our menu of ministry and that involves those who are volunteering their time and energy to support our emerging **MINISTRY OF RECREATION** that is taking place in the ARC. They are enabling a new connection with our community and a new possibility for being in ministry with them.

It is, when you stop to think about it, a rather remarkable contribution that so many are currently making to the life and vitality of our congregation.

We are all familiar with the wisdom that suggests that “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” The same could be said for doing the work of ministry. It takes the whole village of a congregation to accomplish the good and important work of being the church that God has called us to be. It is the integration of many lives, talents, abilities, passions and convictions that enables us to accomplish together what we simply cannot accomplish on our own. I invite you to celebrate these accomplishments by offering your applause in appreciation for all that is taking place. (Applause!)

This then, is our song. It is what we do in response to the story of what God has done, is doing and will yet do in and through us. These are, without question, challenges times for this or for any church. As someone has said, “We don’t know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.”

So it is that we place our trust in the One who holds the future and invest the resources of our lives—our time, our ability, our energy and our money in the work that God has set before us. It is good and important work and it is our good privilege to share in this work together. It is not the work of a few or the most gifted among us. It is our work. It is our elephant and we have the opportunity to share in this needed work together.

Let us say, “Good-bye” to our partial and piecemeal lives. Thanks be to God for this time, for this place and for this opportunity share together in the integrated life of this community of faith, members as we are of the Body of Christ.

As a way of offering visual testimony to what I have tried to say in words, Linda Green has put a video together that illustrates the nature of the Body of Christ when it is working together in love and service to others. Let’s watch!