

Called to Serve
October 20, 2019
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Today is Laity Sunday which celebrates the ministry of all Christians.

In 1 Peter 2:9 we learn:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light”.

Laity Sunday has been a part of the church calendar since the late 1920’s and 1930s. It honors the baptismal call of all Christians to ministries of teaching the faith, reaching into the community, witnessing to the gospel, and working to transform lives.

In the early days of American Methodism, the laity served and maintained congregations between visits of the circuit riders. Pairs of itinerate lay preachers were sent on circuits to train up the local ministers and the stewards who oversaw the various societies. Most important were the leaders of classes who provided spiritual oversight for those under their care. What John Wesley and Thomas Coke and Frances Ashbury did was open the door for hundreds of men and women to become leaders in the vast missionary endeavor of spreading scriptural holiness across the nation. Wesley recognized the gifts and commitment of these persons and enlisted them into God’s service.

The mission they joined was grounded in God and God’s promises. Their focus was outward, where they sought to share God’s love in Christ to the world. Their witness was not only sharing the way to salvation, but an evidencing of salvation through caring and compassion for others. Love of God and neighbor led them to be innovative in meeting human needs in their various communities. Women as well as men were empowered to witness, nurture, mentor, serve and eventually preach.

In an article by John Fowler, a quote from Martin Luther: “Every Christian man is a priest, and every Christian woman is a priestess, whether they be young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, scholar or illiterate. All Christians are, properly speaking, members of the ecclesiastical order, and there is no difference between them except as they hold different offices.”

As we gathered together in fellowship to worship and praise our God, we celebrate our call as lay servants of Jesus Christ. We join our brothers and sisters around the world in recognizing the work that has been done and the work that is still to be done.

The work set before us is difficult and challenging. With all the changes that are taking place in the makeup of the church and the turmoil in the world, we may not feel prepared to do God’s work. Our scriptures this week offer us guidance in doing God’s work.

Our scripture reading from Jeremiah this morning declares: “I will put my instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say “Know the Lord!” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin”. These first believers had these instructions “on their hearts” and the conviction of their faith to share with everyone the wonderful saving grace of God through the Holy Spirit. As these early believers practiced keeping God in their minds and hearts, so too should we be seeking this path to service.

The early church grew rapidly as the Holy Spirit guided it through conflict, prejudice and crisis. Jews and Gentiles were eagerly responding to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Influential persons were being converted. Saul of Tarsus, who would become Paul, was converted during this time of challenges. But even as the church grew with new believers, there was ongoing persecution that caused many to be scattered through the nations.

The church grew because these believers got involved. We can look to the work of the lay persons in building up the church at Antioch. They spoke of their faith. They had simple and personal conversations with people about what they believed and what Jesus had done in their lives. They shared the truth about Jesus and the Good News that the forgiveness of sins and the promise of salvation was available for all.

How are we at sharing our faith story with those around us?

As the Holy Spirit joined with these early believers, He is alive and with us today. The Holy Spirit equips and guides us.

He teaches us to pray. He helps to equip, furnish and supply lay persons with whatever they need for the work of the ministry of the building up of the body of Christ, knowing how to match each lay person's maturity with the ministry responsibility that is most suitable. Holy Spirit is able to use laity to provide encouragement, inspiration, correction, counseling, hospitality, healing, prayer, teaching, preaching and giving ministries.

Just as the Holy Spirit has a part to play, we too have a part to play as found in our reading this morning in 2 Timothy: "You must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that every person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good. Preach the word. Correct, confront and encourage with patience and instruction."

As an example of how this can be seen in the community, let me share with you a story of Mary Brevigleiri, our District Lay Servant Ministry Director:

My friend, Mary, has shared how a prayer ministry has grown at her place of work. It started many years back when a man in her company was going through some very difficult times. Mary had asked him what was wrong and he shared with her his problems. Mary then asked him if he would like to pray with her. The man accepted and it became a morning ritual. As time went on, one or two others would come and join the man and Mary and eventually more employees gathered each morning at 9 a.m. It has now become a regular part of the day where Mary works. As she is semi-retired recently, she thought it might not continue, but it has because others that have stepped up to continue this prayer ministry. Mary has "continued with the things she has learned" and in so doing has brought Christ into her workplace --- one person at a time. One conversation at a time. Witnessing and showing God's grace to others where she is planted.

Our scripture from Luke 18: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show that they should always pray and not give up". As the widow was persistent in her seeking justice from "the judge who neither feared God or cared what people thought", so should we be relentless in our seeking to do God's will.

It is my hope that we can all use the tools that this week's scriptures have spoken of, to help us in our daily walk with Christ: the keeping of the scriptures on our hearts through reading and studying, the living out of the scriptures in our daily lives, constant praying, and to have the perseverance of the widow when times are the hardest.

The laity of the Woodbury United Methodist Church has accomplished much through their perseverance:

See around you the restoration work on the outside of the church and the new sanctuary design that is coming to completion. It is by God's Grace and through the work of the laity of this church, with the help of the clergy, that this has been accomplished. Laity has been worshipping together, singing a joyful song unto the Lord in the choirs, participating in bible study together, sharing meals together at our spaghetti suppers, sharing in mission work and mission trips both in our community and to Ecuador and so much more.

Do we still have challenges to face now and in the future? Yes.

But we know that with God all things are possible, and by our faith, through prayer and persistent dedication we will be the conquerors God says we are.

May the words of this song by Dr Leon Tucker and Mack Weaver inspire you:

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart,
And love that soul through me;
And may I faithfully do my part
To win that soul for Thee.

Lord, may I love, as You have loved
The souls of those I know;
And grant me power from heaven above
Thy love for them to show.

May you be open for opportunities to minister to your family, your friends, your neighbors and strangers that God may send your way.

On this Laity Sunday, may you know that as you come to serve Him, God is shining his face upon you and lifting you up; covering you with his grace and blessing you with his love.

Amen