

## **Called to Serve, Lead and Equip**

Isaiah 42:1-4, Ephesians 4:11-13

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*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;*  
Isaiah 42:1-4

*The gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some  
pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*  
Ephesians 4:11-13

Protestors filled the streets this past week – say his name - George Floyd.

Anger and grief. Marching and standing in silence.

A week many of us need to listen to our African-American siblings  
about what needs to change.

Moments of powerful truth being spoken about systemic and structural racism  
and white privilege.

Moments of when some people in power chose excessive force and violence and photo ops.

And moments when I sense something is shifting, the Spirit is moving, there is a deeper  
awareness of our old identities and what needs to be reborn in us and in our church and  
community and country and world.

If you stay at home and watch the news by yourselves, you could feel overwhelmed and be  
stuck in worry that nothing will change.

Today we are reminded we are not alone. The Holy One, God is with us and in us. And we are  
a community of faith, a church, a Body knit together by the Spirit. Today we celebrate a  
special aspect of being a church, in the Presbyterian household when we ordain and install  
Elders to lead us and Deacons to offer the ministry of care and compassion.

We are installing these leaders in a new way which feels challenging. We are doing this on  
Zoom. A new normal of taking a moment as a church to recognize that God calls people and  
people can respond to serve in certain times in the life of the church to help fulfill our larger  
calling.

What do we and our leaders need to know about leading for such a time as this?

Isaiah has a lesson for us. Over the course of 66 chapters, the writings go from the depths of judgment to the heights of God's compassionate caring for the people, sometimes, with startling speed. The reason there are so many peaks and valleys has to do with the structure of the book, most likely cobbled and edited together from the prophecies of at least three eras, three different sets of historical circumstances.

Our passage is from the section commonly referred to as Second Isaiah. It was likely written during the 6th century BCE, after the Hebrew people had been taken into exile. While First Isaiah has harsh words of warning for the people in their unfaithfulness and lack of justice for the vulnerable, the prophet has words of hope in Second Isaiah because the people are broken-hearted and fearful.

The passage we read today is one of a number of poems throughout Isaiah known as the Servant Songs. The prophet wrote,

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)*

We hear echoes in these words from the story of Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven proclaiming, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17)

Often these Servant Songs are interpreted that there will be one person, chosen by God, to lead the people and bring about justice. However, there is another school of thought about the Servant Songs. This sees them as less about an individual than a community, God's covenant community. The prophet, rather than raising people's hopes that one person will come to save them, is encouraging them to look to themselves, to their own gifts, to the strength they find in community. That is where they will truly find hope: in knowing that they are called by God, they are God's beloved, that God delights in them, that God is with them.

I think we hold these ideas in tension. Jesus models servant leadership. Cosmic Christ as divine love. And communities of faith are called by God. We as a church, a community of faith - we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We too are chosen, called and beloved. God has given us our own unique gifts, the gifts of that Holy Spirit, to serve God and reflect God's love and justice. We need one another and partners in the whole community in this rebirthing process. Even in the pandemic, we have relied on one another.

In our church, we are grateful for servant leaders. They help us follow the ways of Jesus, live as those united by the Spirit, lead with humility and hope.

What else can we learn about the ways our leaders and our community faith function in this time?

You might be surprised that it comes down to a matter of punctuation. Sometimes a comma can make all the difference in the world. Ephesians 4:11-12. The King James Version of this verse says that

*Christ gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*

The two commas in this translation divide the verse into three equal tasks. Pastors & other leaders do three things: perfect the saints, the work of ministry, & edify the body of Christ.

This threefold translation in the King James Version has had a powerful influence on the church in the last four centuries. Unfortunately, it misconstrues the original Greek, mostly by adding a comma that shouldn't be there.

The original Greek of Ephesians 4:12 would be translated

*Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers "for the equipping of the saints into the work of ministry into the upbuilding of the body of Christ."*

You can see that there are not three equal phrases here, each outlining one duty of pastors and other leaders. Rather, the pastors and church leaders have one main task assigned to them: the equipping of the saints – saints as in followers of Jesus' way. They are to equip the people for two parallel tasks: the work of ministry and building up the body of Christ.

The King James Version, by adding a comma after "saints," led centuries of readers to assume that only apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers were to do "the work of ministry." They were thought to be only actual ministers. But, in fact, Ephesians 4:12 teaches that all of God's people are the ministers, who are to be equipped by the leaders for their ministry.

We together do the work of ministry. We together look inward to be a loving community of hope and comfort and support and friendship. We have different skills and gifts and time and energy. It changes over time. We together look outward into our neighborhood. We dream about and plan for ways we welcome people online and on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and E.

Elders on the session continue to impress me with how they trust and respect each other. I am struck with their willingness to be open to the Spirit, to discern where God is calling us. What we as a church are called to be and do in this time of listening to brown and black neighbors. It may make us uncomfortable. We may need to sit with new questions.

Our Deacons (Greek biblical word *diákonos* meaning “servant”) offer support by calling people on the phone, emailing, and reflecting Christ’s love in friendship and comfort. Their ministry dramatically increased as Covid 19 stay at home order started. Those connections and conversations and checking in are really needed. Ministry is shifting and new deacons will help set priorities for this ministry.

Together – servant leaders encourage and equip people. Together – equipping the congregation to help each person do what they can to share in our ministry and mission. Together looking outward – for those spiritually hungry, for those seeking different kinds of healing and hope, those seeking kindred spirits to meet challenges.

We need the encouragement and support of one another every day. Sometimes we nudge one another to forgive, to leave the hurts and grudges behind, to drop our heavy burdens. Sometimes we remind each other to let the tears flow. Other times we offer our prayers to the Holy Artist, trusting that Holy One will do something beautiful with all our broken pieces. Sometimes we invite each other into the silence of contemplative space. Sometimes we take challenge each other to take a stand on issues of racial justice and caring for the earth and peacemaking.

So let’s give our leaders what they need. At our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in September 2019, I suggested that we as a congregation needed two things going forward. I think our leaders, our Elders and Deacons need them now and one more item.

- They need **scrapbooks and photo albums**. They need to see where we have been and remind us of the ways God has been with us in the past as we faced challenges and celebrated joys as we follow the ways of Jesus.
- They need **binoculars**. They need to look farther down the road. Where is the Spirit leading us?
- And I would add one more item. **A Compass**. Our leaders need a compass to help us discern the right direction at this time in our country. How will we stand for racial justice, for protecting the earth, and for a deep love for all people? Amen.