



CENTERED ON
CHRIST
+
EMPOWERED BY
THE SPIRIT

A Monthly Devotional Resource for
Leaders and Councils

Northeastern Ohio Synod, ELCA
2023




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Centered on Christ + Empowered by the Spirit + We Move Outward in Love

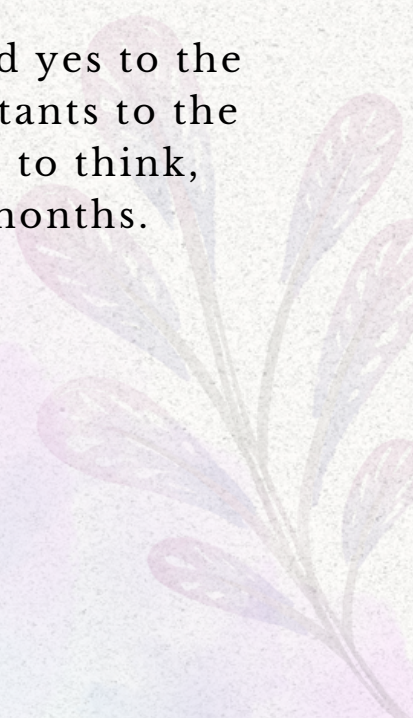
This is our 6-year theme for our lives together in the Synod. It is intentionally written in this order of Christ – Spirit – Our Work because this is the only way we have the stamina, the creativity, and the perseverance to move forward. We can only be God’s hands and feet in the world when we are first centered on Christ and then empowered by the Spirit.

The first set of devotions are on the theme “Centered on Christ.” Each writer has chosen their scripture and chosen how it is connected to us centering ourselves in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The second set of devotions are themed on “Empowered by the Spirit.” These reflect on scriptures that remind us that the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, fills us with inspiration for the work of discipleship.

This devotional was the brainchild of Pastor Scott Bacon who brought Ms. Rebekah Wissler, your Kaufman Resource Center Director, on board. Between the two of them, they have made this devotional happen. It is hoped that this would be of use for Council and other meetings within your congregation.

The devotions were crafted by pastors who said yes to the ask, your Conference Deans, and the two Assistants to the Bishop. I am so grateful for their willingness to think, write and pray with you over the next 12 months.

+Bishop Laura Barbins



January
Centered on Christ
"Getting a Little Dusty"

Luke 9:23-25 - Jesus said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?"

Christ Jesus' charge to every person who would dare live by faith in him is the same: follow me. Follow me in helping others in humbleservice. Follow me in speaking the truth in love. Follow me in being witness of God's grace in a graceless world. Follow me in the work of forgiveness. Follow me.

How closely are we as a congregation following Christ Jesus? How closely are we as leaders of that congregation following him? No matter how each of us answers with words and affirmations, the true answer is on the front of our clothes.

In his time on earth, Jesus called disciples. Just as a rabbi would do. There was a Hebrew saying that disciples "walked in the dust of their rabbi." Meaning that they were so closely following their rabbi that the dust from the rabbi walking in front of them would get on their clothes. Are we as a congregation walking in the dust of our rabbi, our Savior, so closely that our clothes are dusty from him? They need to be. In an anxious time of polarization, isolation, change, and suspicion, we, as disciples of Christ Jesus, need to be getting a little more dusty from following him in the chaos.

How do we as a congregation and its leaders get more dusty? Remember Jesus' words to Simon at the Last Supper: "*You call me rabbi and Lord, and rightfully so, for that I am. So if I, your rabbi and Lord, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example.*" (John 13:13-15a) Getting a little dusty means being as Christ in our world by feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and lonely, standing for freedom and justice, witnessing to our faith all because of Jesus. Jesus, who is right in front of us because he and he alone is our bold direction.

1. **What ways, as a congregation, are we already "walking in the dust of our rabbi?"**
2. **What are some new and needed ways we should be getting more dusty?**

Let us, pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are alive and at large in our world. Both in ways we see and hear, and in ways we are blind and deaf to. Therefore, help us as a congregation and as the leaders of it, to follow you more closely. Take us as disciples of your coming kingdom, to see through your eyes, to hear the questions you are asking, to welcome others as you do, to speak truth in love, to act for justice. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to be called your faithful saints.

Amen.

The Rev. Scott Bacon, Pastor, Peace, Canton

February
Centered on Christ

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."
John 14.6*

I got a tattoo once. I told the tattoo artist what I wanted on my forearm. On a drawing tablet he drew an intricate road with lightning, floods, fire and the three words -- "Way, Truth" and "Life." Thrilled with his artistic rendition, I was ready as he placed the needle under my skin to begin the first injection for the letter "L" in "Life." Like a sting from a wasp, the pain of the first ink prick seemed unbearable. I immediately stopped him and suggested that perhaps we could just go with the word "Life!" The artist with red, mohawk hair and tattoos all over his body paused from his work and said to me slowly,

"The -- pain -- is definitely -- part of it."

The word pain was pronounced slowly with more than one syllable. The work resumed and an hour and a half later my arm was permanently transformed.

At the age of five I lost my beloved, tiny, baby blanket down the toilet. I shrieked at the top of my lungs when it accidentally went down with the flush. Not until I reached adulthood, did I learn that my parents had trimmed it down each time they washed it to wean me off it. At the time they told me that each washing made my blanket "shrink."

All these memories represent pain to me – the tattoo needle, my screaming on that morning as my six by six-inch blanket slipped into the swirling hole, my reluctance to give it up to be washed, and the realization later in life that my parents had somehow thought it okay to cut away at something that meant so much to me. The memories of these pains stored in my body are made of the same stuff as the pain unleashed when I stub my toe or when I lose someone or something that I thought would always be with me. The broken heart is the shrieking of a small child wailing for relief.

Perhaps we become more aware of God's love by emptying ourselves. Not unlike Jesus, once dead and taken down from the cross, maybe it's okay when we are limp and let down from the barest of places. The rhythm of God's grace pulses through our losses. Loving like God is being beaten and stripped of trying to avoid collapse, and instead jumping headfirst into what looks like failure to see the resurrective love that has been there all along. It is as if the grief itself is made of God.

To be centered on Christ is to look for God's grace in the death and resurrection of each day. The pain is definitely part of it.

Rev. Dr. Lisa Arledge, Executive Director, Oasis Outreach, Akron

March
Centered on Christ
Matthew 21:1-32

Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the people shout “save us”, and the “whole city is in turmoil.” The people need saving from the tyrannical rule of Rome, but Jesus came to for a different kind of saving. Their turmoil was a sign of the confused state of God’s people; they were concerned for themselves and how they were impacted by Roman oppression. They were faithful believers, but not faithful doers. Believing in God did not change their daily lives; they saw God as a means to what they wanted.

The turmoil continues when Jesus enters the Temple and drives out those who were selling and buying, and overturns the tables of the money changers. Again, the people’s connection to God did not affect their daily lives. They lead lives doing what they wanted instead of what God commanded. Jesus came to disrupt the status quo of their daily life.

The next day, Jesus is back in the Temple and is confronted by the chief priests and the elders; “Just who do you think you are?” they ask. Jesus might rightly have answered; The king of the Jews. But instead of claiming kingship, Jesus responds with his own question. After telling the chief priests and elders a story of two sons and of what their response was to their father’s command to go and do work in the vineyard, Jesus ends the story with this question:

“Which of the two sons did what the father asked?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said, “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and (sex slaves) are going to precede you into God’s kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and (sex slaves) believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him. (Matthew 21:31-32, The Message, emphasis author)

“Changed lives” after being connected to Jesus? In short; yes! And that is it, that is what it means to be a faithful follower; to have one’s life changed. Changed from self-focused, to other-focused. Changed from self-serving to other-serving. Changed from discord, disconnect and division, to harmony, connection and unity. Changed from bitter words about enemies, to love of enemies. Changed from worldly-focus to God-focus.

How about you? Does your life Monday through Saturday look different from non-believers? Is your God-centered life evident by your actions? Do people see the change in you? Jesus offers life-changing freedom. Life-changing for you, and for those who encounter you.

*Rev. William Weidenbach Jr., Pastor, Zion, North Canton and Interim
Dean, Southwest Conference*

April

Centered on Christ

"I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:14

"Been there, done that, got the T-shirt..." In I have a closet full, and I believe a box or two of t-shirts with the insignia of various colleges, vacation spots, sports teams I follow, concerts I've attended, Church camp and Youth Gatherings from decades of participation, as well as congregational shirts. Plus, many more.

They represent times and places and pursuits that once upon a time were important to me, important enough that I can't bear to put those shirts out with the rags or drop them off at one of the clothing donation spots. Funny isn't it, how something that at one time was such a focus of one's attention fades in importance as time passes and one's perspective changes.

Have you seen the shirts with the slogan, "_____ is life...the rest is just details"? Running is life... Football is life... Fishing is life... When one claims something is "Life and the rest is just details" there is devotion, and discipline and desire, and a dedication to who you are and what you do. Thematic shirts, like for youth gathering are intended to help focus the whole of one's life around the message of the Gathering. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians is running a race of sorts he tells them. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal but I press on to make it my own..... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize..." Can't you see St. Paul wearing one of those T-shirts, "Jesus is Life.... the rest is just details."

Paul has a collection of "shirts" ... Hebrew scholar, Pharisee of the year, tribe Benjamin, and as he lists them, he concludes that it's all rubbish! It's garbage! It's yesterday's newspapers, it's the eggshells and the coffee grounds, it's the green fuzzy stuff found at the back of the refrigerator!

Now Paul had not been unhappy in his previous pursuits. The reason he excelled so greatly in his Pharisaic endeavors was because he truly loved what he was doing, as any real athlete does. But in Christ, looking back, he says it's not important, they're just details, because Christ Jesus has made me His own.

The grace and love of God overflowed in him abundantly so much so that from his prison cell he joyously writes to his beloved church in Philippi and urges them on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Centered on Christ he has truly found life, and that's his message to the Philippians and now to us. In all that we do, in all our endeavors, agendas, and plans -center them around Christ – the rest is just details.

Let us pray,

Gracious Lord, You have claimed us as your very own and marked us with the cross of Christ, forever. Guide this gathering of your people that our thoughts, our words, our decisions may be centered on you and that your name may be glorified in and through this congregation.

Amen

Rev. Doug Fidler, Interim Dean, South Central Conference

May
Centered on Christ

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

"Time is money." "Time waits for no one." "Better three hours too soon than one minute late." "Lost time is never found again." "You can't make up for lost time." These are all sayings we have either said or heard in our lives. American culture and work ethic tells us that "Idle hands are the devil's playground." You are what you do. It's one of the first questions we ask someone when getting to know them; "So, what do you do?" We are defined by how we use our time. Are we hardworking or lazy? Are we responsible or flakey? We pride ourselves on how many hours we work, and how hard those hours are.

Even as Christians we do this. How many projects are we involved in? Am I doing enough for God? How many hours do we spend at church or in prayer? We can't even pray without filling every inch of that prayer space with our words and thoughts. We ask God to speak to us, but never take the time to stop, be still, and listen.

Psalm 46:10 tells us to "Be still and know that I am God." First be still. That is what we are called to do. Don't do, BE. Don't talk, listen. Don't move, rest. We are called to take time to just be. Be still. Just be. It is not a waste of time. It is time spent in the holy presence of God. Just be. This allows us to remain centered on Christ and not on ourselves.

That Psalm also reminds us to know that God is God. The implication is that WE ARE NOT! We are not in control. The weight of the world is not on us. We are not the ones who save ourselves or others. It is not on us to make sure the world keeps turning. We are not God. That is what allows us to take the time to be still. God loves us not because of what we do, but because we are God's children.

This month, take time to be still. Breathe. Listen for God. Don't try to fill the void. Let God fill it for you. Be still, sisters and brothers. Be still and know that God is God.

Silence. Don't pray your words. Listen to God's voice. Be still. Be centered on Christ and know that God is God.

Rev. Eric Edwards, Pastor, St. John, East Liverpool

June
Centered on Christ
I notice... I wonder

Take a few deep breaths to help “settle” yourself., and then listen as someone reads this passage from Romans out loud.

Romans 13: 11b-14

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

After it is read take a minute in silence to reflect on these words. Share with each other what you notice or wonder about this passage. (If time allows, do this in pairs first, and then share with the larger group.)

When all have had the opportunity to share (remember to give the introverts extra time!) use one or more of these questions for discussion.

- How do these words help us to center on Christ?
- What do we need to set aside to stay centered on Christ?
- How do we stay centered on Christ?
- What does it mean to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ?”
- Share a time when you “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and made a difference in a difficult situation.
- How does this congregation “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” for the community?
- Complete this sentence: When we are at our best, our congregation puts on the Lord Jesus Christ by
.....”

I have always loved this image of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. When I first became aware of it, I imagined it being like a mask. I could cover up my own self by putting on Christ. The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized that I couldn't just mask myself with Jesus. Instead, it was a matter of giving over my life to Jesus. Yes, I am still me, but at the same time it is Christ who lives in me. It becomes a daily action to remember that Christ is in me, above me, and with me in all things. It is part of the daily remembrance of baptism of which Martin Luther spoke. When I am at my best I live my life with this in mind. When I am at my best I center my day on Christ, knowing that I am a beloved child of God.

Let us pray:

O God, you call us to live our lives centered on Christ so that all we do reflects your love. Help us to put on the Lord Jesus Christ daily. Guide us in our thoughts and actions so that we can set aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let your Spirit flow over us during this time together as we ponder the work you have set before us. Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

*Rev. Julianne Smith, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregation Vitality,
NEOS*

July
Empowered by the Spirit

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with her gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as she calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. - excerpt, Small Catechism of Martin Luther

I have two vivid memories of the first Christmas I can remember, at age 5. #1, and tops on any list, was receiving “Cedric”, our mutt puppy who would accompany me for the next 16 years of young life. In distant second place was my mom receiving from my grandparents, “The Child’s Story Bible” by Catherin F. Vos, replete with colorful, old-timey illustrations; which she would read to, and show me, many evenings as she tucked me into bed. Both gifts taught me something about love and God’s creation, examples of which would go missing if neither had been given.

Indeed, what would I ever have learned of God’s love and care for me if the Spirit had not motivated a host of loved ones to share that with me:

- Our next door neighbor instructing me in a prayer of thanks for the cookies she'd served me;
- The Sunday School teachers who struggled to remain relevant as our class moved into adolescence;
- The Lutheran camp counselors who took the time to actually listen and try to hear *my* insights on the Word of God.

Luther claims, rightly, that "I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the *Holy Spirit* has called me..." I could have learned part of God's identity through nature, on my own. But God's gift of love... the place of grace in my life... our calling for community together... the gift that is forgiveness? None of these is exactly "natural." It "took a village" of parents, grandparents, neighbors, elders and teachers - all in concert with the Holy Spirit - to truly share who God is with me.

So how, as a Council, will we share God's plan? What in our work as a Council will further God's kingdom where we're planted? How will the face of God be made known by what we do together?

O God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - thank you for all who have gone before and touched the lives of those who serve on this Council. May what we do here in turn be a blessing to the world we have received.

Amen.

Rev. Don King, Interim Dean, Northeast Conference

August

Empowered by the Spirit

6 So when they had come together, [the apostles] asked [Jesus], "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." - Acts 1:6-11

One of the most overlooked church festivals, Ascension Day, marks the day Jesus tasked the apostles with continuing the work that he had been doing. When we think of the apostles being sent out, we think of Pentecost, but it started on Ascension. Jesus told his apostles that they would not be his witnesses in Judea and Jerusalem but also Samaria and all around the world. The apostles were not limited to where they were to preach and teach the Good News of Jesus, they would eventually end up at all corners of the world. Some view Ascension as the end of Jesus's ministry on earth. While that may be true in some respects, that is not the case. The apostles knew their work wasn't done yet, as they went back to the city, first to rejoice in the temple, then to wait for further instructions that come on Pentecost. The men in dazzling clothes asked the disciples "Why are you just standing there? Go, there is work to be done!"

We often think that the work of the church is like that of a business; balance the books, pay the employees, and keep up on building maintenance. But the church is not a business, it is so much more than that. The church is people that are gathered for worship, the people that have been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the work of the church is not to keep the doors open and the lights on. The work of the church is in the neighborhoods and communities that surround it. The work of the church is to spread the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus and show the same love and compassion to those around us as God has shown for us. The work of the church is never done.

We must never lose sight that the work of the church is not for our benefit and glory but for the benefit of others and the glory of God. And when we're empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can move mountains and change the world for everyone. That is the mission of the church, the mission that the apostles were given at the Ascension, to continue the work of Christ and spread the Gospel message around the world. That continues to be our mission today as the church.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit to help and guide us as we do your work in the world. Open our hearts and minds so that we are daily reminded of the mission you have given us as your church. Guide us to make decisions that are not for our benefit or glory but for the benefit of others and that give glory to you. We pray this in your holy name.

Amen.

Rev. Robert Eller, Pastor, Emmanuel, New Philadelphia

September
Empowered by the Spirit
The Spirit leads us to seek God

The earth is the Lord's for he made it.

Let us pray:

*O God, whose Son came into the world to make us children of God:
Grant that having this hope we may purify ourselves and be made like
him. Amen.*

A Reading from Acts 17:

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27so that they would search for God* and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28For "In him we live and move and have our being";

How has the Spirit planted in you a desire to seek God? How has the desire to seek God or as Paul describes as "that we would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" influenced or directed your Spiritual journey?

Can we reflect on this seeking for God proceeds all our doing for God? How do we as leaders create an environment in the church that people are encourage to follow the Spirit's leading to seek God first?

We do this realizing the other point of Paul's speech even though we seek God who seems far away or distant or outside us- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. God is not far from us because God's because we bear God's image as a very part of us in Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus Christ, let me seek you by desiring you, Let me desire you by seeking you; let me find you by loving you and love you in finding you.

Amen.

Rev. Larry Klinker, Interim Dean, Southeast Conference

October

Empowered by the Spirit

“Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

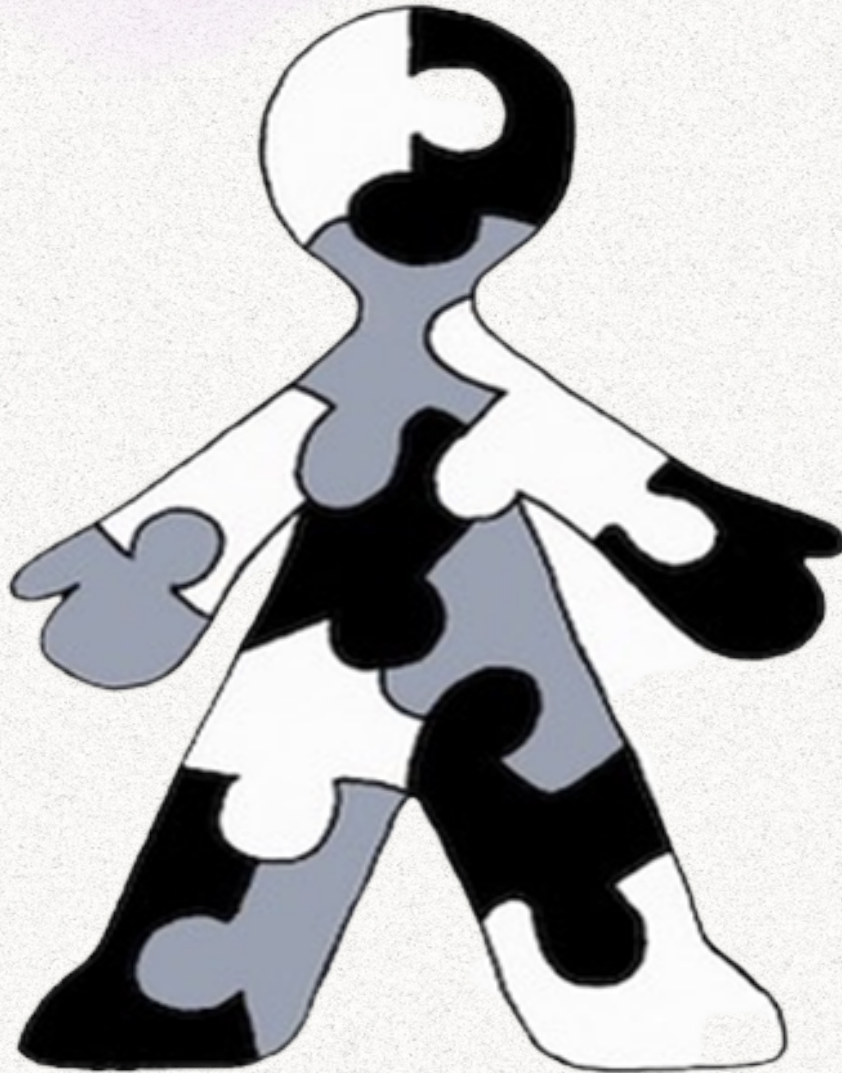
1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (NRSV)

This past Fall the theme for the Stewardship Emphasis at Faith Lutheran Church, Fairlawn was: **One Spirit + One Body + Many Gifts = the Common Good**, inspired by 1 Corinthians 12:4-7. The logo for the emphasis was a “puzzle person” created by Faith member Sue Harman. (See next page.)

I like the “puzzle person” for a variety of reasons. One is that I put together jig-saw puzzles during what I call “Puzzle Season” (November through April). So, it reminds me of something I enjoy, and how 1000 seemingly unrelated pieces can, with intention, produce a beautiful picture. I also think the “puzzle person” is a great illustration of how one Spirit ... plus, one body (of Christ, the church) ... plus, gifts of individuals (represented by each differently colored and shaped piece) add up to the common good being accomplished. In the church, when many bodies, with many gifts, work together, the common good that occurs is bigger and better than one might imagine. That is true of an ELCA congregation, synod and the church-wide entity.

In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the people of Corinth he reminds them, first, that the same Spirit (Holy Spirit) activates a variety of abilities/services in each person. Everyone is given talent to be used for the good of all, particularly the Faith community. The passage also indicates that one gift is not considered more significant than another; there is no ranking of abilities. We need each other, and the abilities each offers. **Life - ministry - is better when we do it together.**

As Paul notes, it's all about us. "YOU are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." We mutually support one another, and use our Spirit-inspired gifts, so that God's will is done. Remember: **One Spirit + One Body + Many Gifts = the Common Good.**



Rev. Jean Hansen, Pastor, Faith, Fairlawn

November

Empowered by the Spirit

10 God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 2:10-11

A formerly Swedish Lutheran Church in the heart of the rich diversity of the urban sprawl of Boston is where I found myself as a young, newly ordained solo pastor. I really had no idea what I was getting into when I was called there! I had a very romanticized view of ministry, but especially ministry in what I thought would be quaint, sleepy New England. God had all kinds of surprises in store for me. Even more, God had all kind of surprises in store for the congregation I was called to serve. We had no idea how or in what ways we would be empowered to be God's people together as pastor and congregation.

While my first call started nearly 20 years ago now, the experience of that setting and the challenges faced by that congregation are still faced by many of us today. At one time in the heyday of their ministry, most of the worshipers walked to church. When I began to serve alongside the remaining faithful members, nearly everyone drove in from further away suburbs. Once a formerly Swedish neighborhood was now mostly, Latinx, Hattian, Chinese. The city's school district hosted 64 different languages spoken within its schools. The congregation had drastically divided itself from the demographics of the community and I would argue disconnected itself from the neighborhood and surrounding residents.

During my tenure, we engaged in deep listening to the neighborhood, to one another and to the work of the Holy Spirit's guiding. As Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in Corinth, he could have written directly to us, and I'm hedging my bets to say also to you no matter your context and setting! 'None of us can truly comprehend what is God's except the Spirit of God.' We created a new Purpose Statement and five specific Guiding Principles that helped to form the work we engaged in. The fifth and final Guiding Principle still sticks with me as one of my personal principals of living a faithful life: "We trust the Holy Spirit to move us in unexpected ways."

Together, we dove into the unknown, trying new ministries, experimenting with new ways of serving and connecting with our neighborhood, allowing ourselves to take risks doing things we never thought about trying before – all the while we knew the Holy Spirit was empowering us and guiding us forward.

Were there bumps along the way? Absolutely. Was it really tough to continue on when things seemed so uncertain at times? Yep! Did we have to work through conflict and struggles among us as a small congregation? Indeed! The work to follow the path of Jesus into new territory is holy work, but it is also taxing and challenging on those involved. We knew we probably would not gain a lot "bums in the pews" from our efforts, even though that desire would often creep in, attempting to distract from what the Holy Spirit was calling us to attend to, which was simply to share the Love of Jesus Christ with all people. (The core purpose statement of our ministry.)

I share this story of one congregation's efforts to lean on and trust the work of the Holy Spirit to encourage you and your congregational council continue to do the same! Someone who is empowered is someone with authority. You are empowered by God's Spirit, you are enabled to do that which your ministry or your role requires of you. The Holy Spirit will equip you and guide you. She will do things that you alone cannot do. And even more, the Spirit will surprise you and remind you that this holy calling to which we are all called is not really about us at all. It is all about God and God's saving and loving this beautiful world.

Let us pray.

Spirit of God, as leaders called to guide the ministry of this congregation, help us to trust in your empowering work. Give us ears and hearts to listen well as you guide us, teach us, and strengthen us for the work of Ministry. Assist us when we feel uncertain and empower us as you move in unexpected ways!

Amen.

*Rev. Angela Freeman Riley, Pastor, Bethesda on the Bay, Bay Village
and Interim Dean, Northwest Conference*

December

Empowered by the Spirit

4 Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, 5 and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.(1 Cor 12:4-11)

One of the core values in the last congregation I served as a pastor was, “Serving through Giftedness.” As we strove to be a congregation that helped people to grow in discipleship, we were committed to placing people in ministry based on their gifts and passions rather than where we had holes to fill.

That meant we had to invest time in helping people to discover how God had gifted and shaped them for ministry. Over the years I taught a number of different courses and utilized different inventory tools.[1] In every one of them, people came alive as they discovered how God had uniquely shaped them to fulfill God’s calling in their lives.

[1] *Discovering God’s Vision for your Life*, developed by Kenneth Haugk, the founder of Stephen Ministries; “*God. Gifts. You*” by Shirley Giles Davis, who I met when we worked together as presenters for Group Publishing’s Equipping Institute; a small group study out of Saddleback (it did require a modicum of Lutheran interpretation) based on Rick Warren’s S.H.A.P.E. acrostic: Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experiences.

One of the convictions I picked up years ago – and repeated often in my teaching and preaching – is this:

God does not call the gifted – God gifts the called

In our human way of thinking, it is only gifted people who excel in life or get chosen for special things. God's way of doing things, however, is that God calls someone and then gifts them in appropriate ways to fulfill that calling. And every one of us has been called through our baptism to take our place within God's vision for the world.

This gifting and empowering to fulfill God's call in our lives comes through the Holy Spirit. We find three places in the New Testament where this gifting by the Spirit is discussed: 1 Corinthians 12 (above), Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. It is clear in each of these passages that we are empowered by the Spirit not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those around us, for the common good. In other words, spiritual gifts are not possessions we hold for our own benefit, they are tools that we wield for the benefit of others. You recognize the Spirit's empowered and gifted people by the people they leave in their wake.

Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have claimed us as your children through our baptism and have called us to be part of your body here on earth. Stir up your Holy Spirit within us and empower us to fulfill the mission and ministry to which you have called us, that through us, more and more people may come to know of your love.

Amen.

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