

Stewardship is Serving
I Peter 4:7-11
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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To be a servant. To be of use. To be worthy of reliance or trust. To hold an office. To help persons.¹ All of these are possible definitions of the word serve.

Serving is a concept we both embrace and push away. We often find ourselves in situations where we want to serve, where we see something we can do and we are happy to do it. And meanwhile, we sometimes resent serving, especially when we are the last one left alone in the kitchen with a pile of dishes or turning off lights and locking up the office or the church when everyone else has headed home for a nap.

We often find ourselves in situations where unexpected opportunities to serve just present themselves and where it is easy to engage them – to hold the door for a stranger, to give someone a ride home, to offer a meal to someone who is hungry. Meanwhile, we sometimes resist serving, especially when we are told *that* we have to or *how* we have to or *how much* we have to.

This is the usual tension around serving, at least for humans in our culture.

And yet, serving isn't just about how we feel about serving or whether we want to do it at that time. Because as Christians, our faith enters into this conversation. And our faith reminds us time and time again that we are called to serve, that as people who claim to follow Jesus serving is not just an option, but it is at the core of who we are, it is in our very DNA.

In fact, today's text reminds us that the commitments we have about modeling our lives after Jesus are about distinguishing ourselves, not to be separatists or to claim to be better than

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serve>

others in some holier-than-thou sort of way, but distinguishing ourselves to live fully as God has called us.

The community to which the letter we know as I Peter was written was a community of Gentiles, resident aliens, and household slaves in Asia Minor. They were living in a time and place where Christianity was under persecution and where making the choice to be Christian often resulted in their being ostracized. The distinctions that are talked about here aren't distinctions we hear at other places in the New Testament between the Jewish and Christian communities, but here the call to live in the way of Jesus is a call to live in ways distinct from the pagan culture around them. In I Peter they are reminded that even though the community around them rejects them, they belong to God's community and they are called to continue to live in God's ways.²

And this reminder that we read in I Peter 4:7-11 begins saying, "...be serious and discipline yourselves...Above all, maintain constant love for one another...Be hospitable to one another without complaining."³

And then, beginning in verse 10, it reads, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."⁴

Did you hear that? So often we read past scripture rather than letting it sink in. But at the heart of this scripture is the claim that our lives are lived on behalf of God...we are

² Background on I Peter comes from the introduction to I Peter in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1991), 337NT.

³ Excerpts from I Peter 4:7-9, NRSV.

⁴ I Peter 4:10-11a

ambassador's who live and speak and serve on behalf of God, after the model of Jesus, as representatives of the kin-dom.

In fact, as someone pointed out in Bible study a couple weeks ago, verse 10 reminds us that what we have is for others. In our culture we focus a lot of individual ownership, but the claim of our faith is that what we have is gifted to us *to share with others*. It is not ours with the choice to share what we consider to be excess, but we are given the role of stewards, of caretakers, of those who are entrusted with spiritual gifts, with talents, with financial and material resources, with our very lives for the purpose of serving the community and sharing the love of God.

Our lives are not ours alone. Our gifts are not ours alone. If you are one who has the gift of empathy, of feeling deeply what others are going through, then that gift is given so you can respond to the needs of others. If you are one who has the gift of music. That isn't given simply so you can perform and get applauded or make the big bucks. Rather, that gift can be used to draw people to God, to teach another generation of musicians, to help people find words and feelings for their lived experience. If you are one who has the gift of hospitality, of welcoming others and making them feel at home, this isn't a gift that is given only in order to host family gatherings for those you already know and love, but a gift that can help people come to know the depth of God's love and wideness of God's mercy.

And, while each of us can relate to this conversation individually, it is also important to remember that these words were written to a community...it is important to remember that we are hearing them today not as solitary individuals gathered in the same space, but as a community of people who are connected.

As Pheme Perkins reminds us, “Many Christians read these verses as though they only referred to individual conversion and virtues practiced by each person as an individual. [However,] the biblical vision of salvation focuses on the community, the people of God, rather than isolated individuals. Passages like this one remind Christians today that faith requires community. Believers should be active members of local churches that are gathered for prayer, for mutual support, for celebration. They are also reminded that local churches should be places in which all members of the church share the particular gifts that God has given them.”⁵

It is not just to keep the ministry of First Christian Church going that we ask you to share your gifts. When you receive a form in the mail this week upon which you can indicate ways you feel called to serve in the coming year, this isn’t just because we who are staff don’t have time to do everything that is needed. Rather serving in a community and as a community is the call of our faith. It is a core value of those who follow Jesus.

So, how will you serve?

How will we serve together?

To what ministries are we called? How do the gifts and graces and resources of those of us who are connected to First Christian compliment each other in such ways that they call us to sustain ministries we have been doing for years and to embrace new ones?

These questions are at the heart of this passage from I Peter. They are at the heart of our life together. Because as stewards of God’s good gifts, we are called to serve.

Before we sing our Hymn of Discipleship, I invite you to listen to this witness from Bob and Diane DeWitt as they talk about why they chose First Christian as their church home.

⁵ Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* in the *Interpretation* series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 71.