

“Faithful Stewards of God’s Infinite Grace”

1 Peter 4:10

The doors of our church building have magical properties. You may not have noticed, but these magical effects play out differently for outsiders than for insiders.

When outsiders approach church doors, the magic repels them with thoughts that they aren’t good enough, knowledgeable enough, worthy enough or perfect enough to come inside. Many outsiders are rightly critical of the church they hear about in news headlines that symbolizes only judgment and intolerance.

For insiders, however, these magical properties have a different effect. Insiders pass eagerly through the doors of the building to find renewal and hope. But to return outside, these same insiders must fold up their Christian faith into a tiny bundle and hide it in their pocket or purse until they return to the church and take it back out. Insiders hide their faith in a compartment that is accessed only when gathered with other Christians in the church building.

Our dominant approach in responding to the magical doors is to double down on what we do inside our buildings. We search high and low for programs and activities that will attract and encourage outsiders to become insiders.

By doing so, we neglect the most critical factor: our baptismal calling as members of the body of Christ to take faith out of its hidden compartment and share it through our words and actions in our everyday roles and relationships.

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther proposed that all church members belong to a universal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers.

How can we stir up a culture change that focuses the church's mission on the vocation of the baptized in all areas of our life together? With all our ministries outside of these Divinity walls, we are leading a culture change.

Here in Divinity, we have been blessed with so many opportunities for ministry outside of these Divinity walls.

Our annual Christmas giving tree is in the narthex. The gifts are taken to the Redeemer Crisis Center and given to the children who live around Redeemer.

In that same community along W 25th Street, near the Poe Library, the two Afghan families we are sponsoring are making a new home. A week ago, on November 11, Danette and I rode with Mr. Bob to pay them a visit. Paul Klemme met us there. Bob has become Mr. Bob because they were friends with one of our military men in Afghanistan whose name was Bob. They called him Mr. Bob.

Mr. Bob figured out a way to lower the clothes line in the basement so the two very short women could reach it. We're talking JoAnn Worsencroft and Jackie Difford height.

Paul, Danette, and I sat with the children and fathers in the living room working on coloring, learning the alphabet (Paul's specialty), and numbers. After a while, the women came from the dining room and joined us for the first time in the living room, sitting on cushions on the floor. Danette's presence gave them permission to join us.

In *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life* Dwight L. DuBois says congregations need to close the gap between what they do when gathered behind church doors and how they live when sent beyond those doors in Christ's name. They need to create a universal neighborhood for all people.

This means taking our baptismal promises seriously again, found in the Affirmation of Baptism that we use when we receive new members and when our confirmands affirm their baptism.

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

- **To live among God’s faithful people?**
- **To hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper?**

We need to affirm that everything we do as the gathered church forms us for a distinctive way of life. Worship practices are life practices. Confessing our sins trains us for the practice of telling the truth. Singing hymns forms us to thank and praise God. Hearing God’s word centers us in the gospel for every life circumstance.

Confessing the creed is our pledge of allegiance. The intercessions both bring our concerns to God and commit us to responsibility in caring about the people and needs for which we pray. Passing the peace prepares us for everyday reconciliation and peacemaking. At the Lord’s table, we discover radical mercy and hospitality that become our way of life. When we are sent out into the world, our worship practices will have shaped us for discipleship in daily life.

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

- **To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed?**
- **To serve all people, following the example of Jesus?**
- **To strive for justice and peace in all the earth?**

Congregations are summoned to form members who can connect faith and life. Which is exactly what Paul was teaching to first century Christians.

The first-century church in Corinth must have been a lively place. Its members were competitive, jealous, divided into factions and litigious. The congregation was diverse. There were Jews and gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, those brand new to the faith and those with more maturity.

Paul spent over 18 months establishing the church in Corinth. He worked with, lived with, and loved these people. Paul wanted them to know the risen Christ and the life of love and freedom found in Christ.

While the Corinthians were enthusiastic, they weren't very disciplined. They argued about which of them had the superior spiritual pedigree—those baptized by Paul or those baptized by Apollos. They took each other to court. And when they gathered for the Lord's Supper—neither decently nor in good order—Paul wrote, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk” (1 Corinthians 11:20-21).

At his ascension, Jesus told his disciples that they would “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” (Acts 1:8). The church in Jerusalem was the foundation of the Christian movement. It became the parent of the churches founded by the apostles throughout the world.

The decision had been taken at the Council at Jerusalem to welcome gentiles into the way of Jesus. This was a critically important decision and a difficult one. It wasn't universally embraced by everyone. And the saints in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times.

Famine threatened the city. Paul organized a massive stewardship campaign among the gentile churches to send aid to the church in Jerusalem.

Paul would have done well as a development officer. He urged the believers to give generously and cheerfully. He set them up to compete with each other to see which church could be most generous. The enthusiastic Corinthians jumped at the chance, especially if they could do better than the Macedonians! But their lack of discipline was stronger than their zeal, and their stewardship campaign faltered.

Paul wasn't going to have it. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he laid out the spiritual basis for giving: it was about opening the self and the community, it was about glorifying God, it was a new way of thinking about sufficiency.

“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

The concept of sufficiency had changed over the centuries. In Cynic and Stoic philosophy, true self-sufficiency was attained when a person became completely independent, with no need of anyone or anything else. By the time Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, self-sufficiency meant not just having enough for oneself but having enough to give away to others. One could have all the wealth and power and status in the world, but if one didn't share with others, that person was not self-sufficient. Contrast the rich young man who could give nothing away with the poor widow who gave everything. The rich young man went away grieving. The widow gave freely.

Stewardship is a deeply spiritual act. It moves us out of ourselves and toward the neighbor in need. It glorifies God. It brings freedom from wealth and status. It unclenches our hands and hearts. It lets us rest in the promise of God's abundance. We become cheerful givers who are living out our baptismal promise in service to others.

May the peace of God . . .

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