

## Why Do We Do What We Do?

Why do we do what we do? Why are we so excited about spending this morning focused on mission? Why are we even here at this Annual Conference? These are questions I hope we will ponder as we experience this time together this morning...

Will you join me in prayer?

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful and kindle in us the fire of Your love. Send forth Your Spirit, and challenge us to live as You would have us live. Change our hearts like they've never been changed before that we may truly become Your witness in the world. Amen.

The church seemed especially still as I sat waiting for the service to begin. There were about 25 of us in the pews, and this was to be the joyful, sending-out closing worship of the Board of Directors of an organization I was so committed to.

I had known most of these people before I came, and we had grown even closer as we had worked together from early morning till late at night over the previous 48 hours. The meeting had been a good, productive one, and several key decisions were made. From here we would all go back to our communities and begin again to spread God's love to our hurting worlds.

Only now I was the one who was hurting...as were many of the others sitting beside me. Just as the meeting was ending, a controversial issue had been raised... Emotions ran high, and there was no time to discuss the situation rationally. Angry words were exchanged and bitterness and resentment replaced my sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

"God, I don't have to put up with this!" I thought to myself as I sat in that pew. "Why should I have to work with this person when time after time he stirs up trouble? And now to take communion when I'm so upset... I just can't do it!"

It was hard to fight back the tears. All the good that had been accomplished was totally forgotten as this unfortunate episode consumed me.

"Well, Lord, I'm not going to deal with him anymore. I quit! As soon as I get home I'll send in a letter of resignation and that will be the end of it."

My thoughts were interrupted as the pastor began the Call to Worship. It was difficult to participate when I felt so bitter.

I don't remember much about the service or Ken's sermon except for one burning question that I will never forget as long as I live... "Do you see yourself as an unworthy servant, or as a wonderful volunteer?"

"A volunteer serves Jesus Christ on his own terms. He serves when and how he chooses.... And *if* he chooses. It doesn't matter if he's lay or clergy or paid staff. If the going gets tough, he can even quit!"

Tears ran down my face as I realized that God was speaking to me through Ken's words. This was my ministry- my primary way of serving my Lord- and mentally I had just

quit. Was I living my life as merely a “wonderful volunteer”?

Scripture refers over and over to people in the Old and New Testaments being servants of God. Jesus Himself is the ultimate example of serving. Do you know that the word “volunteer” is not mentioned even once in the Bible?

What an exciting journey this Mission Day has been... working with wonderful people... new friends...enthusiasm and joy from so many for the chance to serve... affirmations like “What a breath of fresh air this will be”... almost 2000 emails and phone calls... more than 200 people from over 40 congregations working on the Habitat house... HUNDREDS of prayers... the privilege of hearing the voice of God as He guided our decision-making...

But with the joys also came the challenges... I’m sure there were times in trying to schedule all those volunteers that Ellen, Chuck, and Stacy from Habitat may have wanted to quit. I must admit there were many times I wondered why I ever thought this would work and two times I wished I could quit.

Needing to raise \$55,000 for all the projects should have been easy... only \$70 from each of our 800 plus churches would have been more than enough. When many questioned how we would get the money, I very confidently replied, “This work is God’s vision... the money will be there.”

However, at the critical decision point of if we would go forward with sponsoring the Habitat house, I agonized for 2 days over if Bob and I would have to cash in some of our retirement if the money didn’t come in.

The very next day my Bible reading was from Exodus 35, the construction of the tabernacle. Listen to the highlights of that reading...

“Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses’ presence, and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work the Lord through Moses commanded them to do. Then Moses summoned every skilled person to whom the Lord had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work. They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp. ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ And so the people were refrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.”

Now I can’t imagine any United Methodist anyone saying, “Don’t bring more money” but I certainly received the timing and the intent of that daily assigned reading as God’s affirmation that money was not to be my worry.

I felt inspired hearing the UMW and UMM stories of giving, the churches with offerings big and small, Dennis Bell’s excitement when the Denison church raised \$1200, the enthusiasm of the Sioux City District as the first to make their \$5000 goal, the comment from a woman in my church who THANKED me for giving them the opportunity to be part of what the Conference was doing.

But every week as I watched the numbers on the website grow, I knew we were far short of the goal. Yes, in disillusionment, a volunteer could want to quit.

Of course, this Mission Day is just a tiny part. In the past 2 days as we have experienced some challenging choices for the future of this Conference, I'm sure there were times some of you, perhaps many of you, may have been like me years ago saying, "When I get home, I'm going to quit. I don't have to deal with this." And unfortunately, every year that does happen.

Why DO we do what we do? Too often, do we serve merely as "wonderful volunteers" instead of servants of Jesus Christ?

As we think of the way Jesus served, we often turn to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John where Jesus washed the disciples' feet. You know the story.

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus poured some water into a wash basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around His waist. Simon Peter, of course was indignant, insisting Jesus would never wash his feet. But Jesus did wash his feet and those of all the disciples as well.

"Do you understand what I have just done to you?" He asked. "You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am. I, your Lord and Teacher have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you."

This story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is often used as a model for our servanthood. Jesus humbled Himself, doing what was considered a slave's job in performing this menial task.

Jesus tells us He has done this to give an example of how we too should serve our fellow human beings.

As we reflect on this passage, we often tend to focus on the encounter with Peter or the challenge not only to serve, but to serve with humility. These are important concepts, but perhaps we have completely missed another significant example Jesus gave us on that Passover night.

Have you ever thought about the fact that when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he washed the feet of Judas as well? Jesus knew that Judas would that night betray Him, and yet He didn't confront him or condemn him but served him in the same manner as the others. Jesus did not choose to be a "wonderful volunteer" who quit when the serving was difficult.

And what was Judas thinking and feeling as the man that he was about to betray served him with such love and compassion? Although the encounter is not specifically described, I would judge that it must have been a painful experience for both of them... for Jesus to know this person whom He had loved and trusted would soon betray Him... and for Judas to know that Jesus loved him so much that He would humble Himself and serve even him in such a degrading way.

What makes Jesus unique in this situation is his relationship to Judas. As they reclined at the table to partake of the meal, Jesus gave to Judas the seat on His left... the place of highest honor, kept for the most intimate friend. And when it was time to eat, Jesus dipped the morsel of bread into the herbs and gave it to Judas, again an honor reserved for an intimate friend as a mark of affection.

The example of serving that Jesus gave us with Judas is more demanding than just washing feet. Between the second and fifth centuries, the rabbis debated the issue of serving in the Talmud. They determined reasons or motives for serving from the least to the most desirable.

They believed the least desirable motive is to serve out of a fear of punishment. The second is to serve out of a desire for reward. The third is because it's the right thing to do. And the highest motivation to serve is out of love for God.

Where do we, as individuals, and we, as a denomination, fit in our motivation to serve?

I would hope we serve out of our love for God but is that what the world sees when they look at us, the church? Or do they think that before we go out to change the world, we need to learn how to clean up our own room?

What if we could create a new culture... or perhaps return to an old one... in the United Methodist Church...in the Iowa Annual Conference... in each of our local churches... where it is obvious to all that we are serving the world because of our deep, committed love for God? What if EVERY one of us took seriously our stated mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ to transform the world?

I challenge every one of us to actually READ what our Discipline says about our mission. WHAT DID SHE JUST SAY? That's right, I said to read The Book of Discipline... in spite of all the jokes about how boring it is. If you don't own a copy, go up to Cokesbury and buy one!

Part III, which is only 8 pages, is titled "The Ministry of All Christians". Paragraph 122, just one paragraph, gives us the foundation of what we need to do...

1. Proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons in.
2. Lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus.
3. Nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley's Christian conferencing.
4. Send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ (not volunteers), by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.
5. Continue the mission of seeking, welcoming, and gathering.

It's all there. A new culture of actually living what we say we are about.

It all starts with the first step... to introduce people to an intimate, vital relationship with Jesus as mandated by Jesus in Matthew 28.

I often think about a statement Pastor Chuck Klink made in a sermon one time. He was telling about the small Iowa Methodist Church where he received his call to ministry, how

they often would sing the wonderful hymn, "I Love to Tell the Story." "I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love."

Unfortunately, that church has since closed. They didn't really mean it. Do we? Do we love to tell the story of Jesus and His love?

The next step is nurturing people in Christian living... or as Bishop Palmer says, "not just make disciples but mature disciples"... to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

Then... because of that deep love for God, we can transform the world through the mandates of Jesus in Matthew 25.

And finally, we go out and do it again and again and again.

What could that "new culture" mean to the Iowa Annual Conference... our local churches... to the unchurched we are called to serve?

This morning we are being given a unique opportunity that will NEVER come again in this Annual Conference. Never again will this group of people have this set of opportunities to make a difference in the world... a time to learn and serve together... not as volunteers who can quit if things aren't organized exactly right... or if we didn't get our first choice... or we don't agree theologically with those serving by our sides. We have this time to learn and serve and ponder the future of our church as servants of Jesus Christ.

And the world will then know... Why do we do what we do? Because we love Jesus... our love is in our actions... and we will never again think of ourselves as volunteers. We are servants of our dear Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen!