

<Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32:1-11; Luke 9:1-6>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I learned quite a bit over my years as a solo pastor in small congregations, though many of those lessons can be summarized with the phrase, "if there's no one else to do it, then the minister will." Not, "will try," but "will." Drawing on my customer service experience from seminary, I honed my skills of juggling administrative tasks alongside ministry endeavors. I learned how to replace an entire toilet, from the wax ring up, the day before a funeral because there was no one else available to do the job. YouTube helped a lot. But while I learned to do many various and sundry tasks and skills around the church, one thing I didn't learn - and I was very upfront with the search committee as we talked about it - I did not learn delegation very well. There often wasn't anyone available to delegate to! And so ministry became a two-fold unhealthy dynamic: I, as the minister, was doing much of everything, and feeling increasingly isolated.

This past week at Wellspring for Women, and this was entirely unplanned and providential, the conversation centered around the all-too-popular, and all-too-false phrase, "God will never give you more than you can handle." First off, that's nowhere in the Bible, and examples from the Bible usually show an opposite reality. But what we do see in the Bible, as well, is that when you feel overwhelmed - whether by the world, by the situation you face, by the demands of work or calling or even family - when you feel overwhelmed, the promise is that you will not face these stressors alone.

Culture today has strongly promoted the ideal of rugged individualism. The idea that each one should be able to do all things necessary, without any help or support. It's even gone so far as to claim that to ask for help is a sign of weakness and inability.

Friends, if I have anything at all to say to you today, it is simply this: the idea that any of us accomplish or get through this life without help and support is untrue, plain and simple. In this season of Lent, as we reflect on our lives of faith, on our dedication and growth as disciples, we are invited to see again that we do all of this in community. It is, after all, a community of faith we celebrate when we gather together. It is the gathering of all the people of God, together at the Table when we celebrate communion. It is the drawing of an isolated individual into community, inviting them to join together in ministry and mission.

Jesus, in sending out the disciples to the surrounding area, did not send them each alone. Rather, they were paired, and sent out as teams. Why? So that they might support and complement each other, keep each other company and remind each other that, though this is a sometimes monumental task, none of us engage it alone. They were invited to lead, together. To minister and reach out, together. And in turn, after the ascension of Jesus, they continued this model, inviting others to join them in ministry as the proclamation of the good news expanded further and further.

Who has invited you into ministry, into mission, into communion and fellowship? As you ponder that question, it is my pleasure to invite someone to share their own story with you, a story of being invited into community and ministry, even when it didn't seem like a possibility in the first place. It is my joy to ask Priscilla Tripi to share some of her own experience and story with us now, as you consider the question, “who has invited you?”

(Priscilla Tripi) “When I was asked to do this, I thought to myself, what was I going to say? I've only been a member of a women's circle for eight to nine years. I've only been to four or five retreats and I've yet to get to a Presbyterian's women's picnic at Rushford Lake. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how much Presbyterian Women crept into my life (that is what we used to call it back then—PW's, circles...).

“Ten years ago when I was up to my neck in toys and toddlers, Lynn McConnell asked me if I was interested in coming to a circle meeting. How was I ever going to get four kids up and out of the house for that? I declined her invitation. Then, the school bus started making a regular stop in front of my house! Laura, Amanda, and Alison would step onto the bus and slowly a light at the end of the tunnel started to shine. I would only have to drag one kid out of the house, not four. It just might work, I had thought. And, what a pleasure it was to sit, have coffee, something to eat, somebody watching my little one in another room, and intelligent conversation.

“Time came when it was decided that our circle should have a name. Again Lynn McConnell approached me and asked how I would feel if the circle were to be called Rebecca Circle in memory of my sister Becky, who had been very active as a youth in the church years before, (and whose unexpected passing...) I knew then that Presbyterian Women would always be a part of my life. Her asking me to name the circle in my sister's name was by far the most loving thing anyone had ever done for me. Thank you Lynn.

“I then heard talk of a women's retreat. Imagine one whole night and one whole day without a husband, kids, or meals to cook. But how could I ever ask Chuck to stay home for 24 hours and be a full-time parent to our children. The kids would miss me, they'd starve, and they would still be wearing the same clothes I left them in when I got home the next day. Well, I slowly started to work the idea into our conversations. The response wasn't negative, but it wasn't really positive either. I still had a few weeks to work on it. The spring retreats are now an assumed function at our house. In fact, I think they appreciate them more than I do.

“Then, with a couple retreats under my belt, I slowly had to work the words Ames, Iowa into conversations with my husband and family. We are not talking a 24 hour retreat just a half hour away from home, we are talking about six and a half days away, and across the country! I could never have gone to that first national gathering of Presbyterian Women, in 1991, without the coaxing of certain members of the Presbyterian Women of our church and a long time member Carolyn Mathias, asking my mother at book club if she would watch my four girls for four of those six days while Chuck was at work. Thank you Carolyn. I can't tell you how renewing and eye opening it

is to spend six days with 4,000 Presbyterian women. I've been to two gatherings now and have started to bring the next one that was to be held in Louisville, Kentucky, into our conversations. Thank you, Chuck!

“When I went to see my grandmother the other day, we somehow got on the subject of sewing. She started to talk about how she used to sew so many stuffed animals and aprons for her church bazaars and I started remembering going to women's association meetings with her when I was about three or four. We would pack a lunch, head up Kenmore Avenue to Niagara Falls Blvd and walk up the brick road until we got to University Presbyterian church. She and all her friends would have a little business type meeting, eat their lunches and then start sewing up a storm. Being the angelic little thing that I was, I would sit quietly and listen to them talk about their church things and would occasionally hear someone mention about how sweet I was. I think that is what they said:)

“I sat and listened to my grandmother talk and I realized that Presbyterian Women has always been a part of my life. It was the center of my grandmother's life. I know it was an important part of my mother's life. She made so many good friends at that time. Friends that she still needs and appreciates. Those friends have watched me grow for thirty some years and are now watching my children grown. Those friends are now my friends, also.

“I can't imagine walking into church on Sunday mornings or any morning for that matter and not feel that deeply rooted bond that there is among the women in this church. We are truly sisters and a sister is someone who will always be there for you, will always lend strength and support to you, and will always, always, always, love you.”

Thank you, Priscilla. None of us is in this alone, and long before that ever became a question, each of us was invited in. And I don't just mean brought to church by parents or grandparents or neighbors, though that is a wonderful gift, as well. Each of us has been invited to go a further step into the fullness of community - invited to join a committee or a project, invited to make a new connection when someone says “hi, nice to meet you” during fellowship, invited to become more than just an individual who walked in the door. Who has invited you? And when was the last time you invited someone?

I'm delegating that task to each of you today, and to myself anew: Invite someone. Make a connection. Build community. Ask for their help with a project, or to make a visit, or to be an active part of something that is going on here at the church. Invite them into community, just as we have been invited in the past. And in this, the Kingdom of God will grow, and our Lenten journey will continue to bring us closer to God and to one another. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)