

March 25, 2012, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

John 13:1-15, James 2: 14-17

Prepared to Answer (Fifth in a Series, Living up to Promises)

At the age of 18, Mother Teresa felt God's call to full-time service, and she followed that call to the slums of India, where she served the poorest of the poor with all of her strength.

People all over the world admired her dedication, her perseverance, and her compassion, which were her spiritual gifts. Her life was filled with the practices of prayer, presence, and service. She witnessed to the gospel of Jesus Christ with everything she did.

She lived her faith out in a way that changed people's lives.

She lived in poverty, becoming one with the people she served, not in any way above them or separated from them. She wore the same kind of clothes they did, ate the same food, lived the same way.

She prayed and worshiped daily, and together these formed the foundation of her spiritual life. They gave her the strength and the patience

and the perseverance to continue on. Without those practices, I don't think she would have been able to continue in her work.

Since the beginning of Lent we have been talking about living up to our membership vows to uphold the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

I began this sermon series by talking about prayer---how we are upheld by God when we pray and how it is vitally important that we pray for our church as well.

So "Prayer" goes in the center of our circle. It's where we begin, it's where we go back to, and it's the foundation of all of the other ways that we uphold our church, just as it was the foundation for everything that Mother Teresa did.

Without prayer we are missing our focus. Since it's in the middle, you might even see it as the bullseye of a target, the center of our lives, the place where everything begins. From prayer we move out to other spiritual practices that uphold us, and we, in turn, uphold the church by

making those practices part of our lives. The second and third practices in our circles are internal, that is, they are within the church.

We uphold the church by our presence here in worship and with each other, and we also uphold it by our gifts, which make it possible to bring the Kingdom of God to be realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Today we are talking about the fifth piece of our membership vows---- upholding the church by our service. This practice and the final one, which is witness, are both external. We serve God by serving others, and we witness to others as well.

Both of these take place outside of the church, or if we serve in the church, they are visible and recognizable from outside, by those who are not part of our church family.

We will save the final vow of upholding the church by our witness as our topic for the next two weeks.

Upholding the church by our service---- there are many, many ways to uphold the church by our service, but first I want to talk about why service is important.

In the passage from the letter of James that we heard this morning, we are told that “Faith without works is dead,” and the question is asked, “If someone needs clothes or food, what good is it to say, ‘Be warm and well fed!’ if we don’t take care of their needs?”

James is telling us that words are just words! It is great for us to believe in God and have that relationship with God for ourselves, but what does it really mean if we don’t act on that faith? What is the purpose of it if we don’t do anything with it?

Jesus didn’t just wash the feet of the apostles and then say, “There, now, all clean! Time for dinner!” While they were recovering from the shock of their leader and teacher doing the work of a servant, he went over the edge, telling them to follow his example and wash the feet of others.

Instead of aspiring to a position of power, where servants would wait on them, Jesus told them that they were to be the servants of others! The apostles must have struggled with this idea, at least until after the resurrection, when they seemed to figure it out mostly very well.

We still struggle with this today. If we are to lead the world to know Christ, if we are part of Christ's church, what does it mean for us to be servants of others? How are we to wash other people's feet?

Should we wait inside the door of the church with a wash tub and a towel and wash people's feet as they come in? I think that visitors might be scared off so fast they would break the sound barrier!

So how can we follow Jesus' command to wash feet? What does it mean for us? Maybe first we can look at what the apostles did to obey that command----

There is no record in scripture of the apostles literally washing anyone's feet. But they did serve others in many ways---by taking care of the poor and needy, the widowed and the fatherless. By preaching the gospel and taking it to people in other places.

By making decisions and administering the early church. By interpreting the words and actions of Jesus Christ and testifying to the way God provides for people. By healing and teaching and leading worship.

They did all of this according to the spiritual gifts that each one of them had been given.

Last fall I preached a sermon series about spiritual gifts. Some of you have completed a spiritual gifts assessment, and even if you haven't, I think you probably have some idea about what your spiritual gifts might be.

No one has all of the spiritual gifts, remember. Each one of us has some gifts, usually one primary gift and 2 or 3 supplemental gifts.

There are many spiritual gifts. They include compassion, teaching, preaching, word of knowledge, administration, music, missions, evangelism, advocacy for the voiceless, hospitality, and many more.

The Holy Spirit gave us our spiritual gifts when we were baptized, but it's up to us to discover them and develop them, and then to find a way to use them in serving God.

We are each called to service, but we are called to serve in different ways. God has equipped us for service by giving us spiritual gifts.

If you still don't know what your spiritual gifts are, I think the best way to discern them is to follow your heart! NOT just what you like to do or even what you're good at---but doing what fulfills you.

It may scare you a little bit at first, because it might be different from anything you have ever done before. But once you have committed to the type of service you feel called to, it will just feel right! You will know what God has called you to do in your heart when you are using your spiritual gifts in service.

And this is the first reason that we vow to uphold the church by our service, because when we serve God with our spiritual gifts, we are moving toward becoming the people that God created us to be. We are on track on our journey to God, walking in the footsteps of Christ.

The second reason for this part of our vow is this----Jesus Christ served us and he told us to do the same---to wash others' feet. As I said, this is not meant literally. There are more needed ways of serving others, ways that Christ lived out throughout his ministry---feeding the hungry, teaching, healing, loving the poor and the people who are rejected by society, and showing mercy and compassion. Christ meets the deepest needs of people, whether those needs are spiritual or physical, emotional or psychological.

And Christ told us to serve the way he serves, because he has no hands or feet or words but ours.

The reason that we need to uphold the church by our service is simple, but it is also huge! We need to uphold the church by our service because WE ARE THE CHURCH!!

Church is not just somewhere we go on Sundays. Church is who we are! The church is the Body Of Christ----we are the Body of Christ!

Christ serves. He served in the flesh when he walked among us, and now he serves through our flesh, taking care of the hungry, the poor, the sick and the lonely, those who are lost and in need of reconciliation, and those who are searching.

We serve because Christ first served us. We serve because we are obedient to his command to us. We serve because we love God and neighbor.

We serve because our faith is not dormant and it is certainly not dead! Our faith is alive and real and because it's alive and real, we put action to our words. We put flesh on the Body of Christ. We make Christ real to others, visible and powerful.



We put our bodies where our faith is, the Kingdom of God within us and among us, because we pray “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” and we mean it.

Our prayer is not just hollow words. We want it to be true. And the way God answers that prayer is to equip us with spiritual gifts that we use for God’s purposes.

There are many ways to serve. Some are called to mission trips, serving people they don’t know. Some are called to take care of the church property, caring for the House of God in a way that shows respect and worship.

Some are called to prepare food and serve it. Some are called to sing or play music that lifts the spirits of all who hear, up to heaven. Some are called to teach others about God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

There are as many ways to serve as there are members of the Body of Christ, because God created each one of us to be unique.

What happens if we don't uphold the church by our service? Well, we are missing an important function of the Body of Christ.

Something that God desires to be done, doesn't get taken care of.

People go hungry, the church buildings fall into disrepair, people don't learn about God, the poor are not helped, the sick are not cured, the worship service has no inspiring music.

The storms of life are not stilled. The marginalized are still banished to the outskirts of town. People do not repent and find forgiveness. People do not follow Jesus.

Uphold the church by your service. There is a way for everyone to serve. If you cannot do much, you can write a note to someone. Call someone.

Come to church for an hour and take care of a chore that's been neglected.

Sing in choir. Bring a can of food for the hungry, or take a filled plate to someone who hasn't eaten today.

Pray for the sick or the suffering.

Help someone in the name of Christ, even if you never speak about him in the process. You never know how your act of caring will affect someone's life. Even if you don't share the reason for your assistance, you can trust the Holy Spirit to step in and change a life.

If we all answer the call to serve, we, as the Church, will be fulfilling our mission---to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

As the Body of Christ, we can do so much more than we can do as individuals! But without ALL of us serving, we are less than God desires for the Body of Christ to be.

Let us serve God by serving others, using the spiritual gifts we received from the Holy Spirit at our baptism. Let us be the complete Body of Christ as we serve the church and the world!

Amen!