

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • October 18, 2015, Sermon Text**  
**Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**

# **The People of God**



**First United  
Methodist Church**

**DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD**

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Several years ago in a church I was serving, Gregg stopped me on a Sunday morning on the way to the sanctuary to tell me something important. Very apologetically he said that he had to step down from chairing our Administrative Board. He was in his third year and doing a great job. All of his gifts as a young banker in the city making his way up through the ranks to become a leader in his profession were what he brought to the table in the church.

He said, "Phil, I am very sorry to let the church down, but because of my position at the bank I have been asked to become the president of a corporation that runs a Single Room Occupancy project on the north side." Chosen to oversee the running of an SRO, a transitional housing program for those without a place to live, what every city needs a lot more of.

I answered him, "Gregg, don't you see that the SRO is your calling, your ministry, the most faithful use of your gifts? You've done a great job of leading our board, but we can find someone else to do that. We can make it through an agenda each month with another chair, but you have been called to do something that no one else in our congregation has been asked to do. Go with our blessing and change the world, or at least, a few lives."

In our gospel reading for today Jesus says, "I did not come to be served but to serve and to give my life to liberate many people," "as a ransom for many" says the New Revised Standard Version. Go, people of God, use your gifts to set people free. That is the ministry to which we all are called.

The ministry of the laity . . . a word study: "laos" is the Greek word for "the people." In the context of the Church it refers to "the whole people of God," everyone; by definition, even clergy are part of the laity. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church puts it this way: "The heart of Christian ministry is Christ's ministry of outreaching love. . . . All Christians are called through their baptism to this ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfilment. The forms of this ministry are diverse in locale, in interest, and in denominational accent, yet always catholic in spirit and outreach. The ministry of the laity flows from a commitment to Christ's outreaching love. Lay members of The United Methodist Church are, by history and calling, active advocates of the gospel of Jesus Christ." (Par. 126, 127)

We all are ministers, not just me. I am part of you, the laity. Being a Christian is active, not passive; worship is not a spectator sport. We meet in here together so that we can go out there into the world to serve others, sometimes together as we address the ills of society, sometimes as individuals ministering in our unique settings. Where we live, where we work, where we play, where we study, wherever we are . . . that is our place of ministry.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, was very clear that Methodism was to be an initiative made by all the people of God to serve the needs of the vast majority of people who were not being served faithfully by his own church, the Church of England. He was an ordained minister in the Anglican Church until the day he died, often to the annoyance of the bishops and his fellow clergy, but he saw the power of the gospel being lived out in the lives of the shop owners, the miners, the weavers, the factory workers, the farmers, the family care-givers, all serving in Christ's name where they were seven days a week.

Wesley's biggest fear was that the Methodist movement would become a church, an institution become lukewarm; like the Second Law of Thermodynamics, it would cool to room temperature. It would stay hot only if the laity, if all the people of God, would feel the power of the Holy Spirit to serve others, not to gain reward or recognition, certainly not to amass power and authority, but to honor God's will.

The passage we read from The Letter to the Hebrews, an early Christian document, talks about the high priest coming from among the people to stay engaged with the people, helping them with their weaknesses because he was aware of his own weaknesses. It is not a status to seek but a role to play.

I choose to wear a black robe at the 9 a.m. service here in the sanctuary when it is a preaching service, like today, and a white alb, a servant's robe, when we are celebrating Holy Communion, Christian baptism, a wedding, or a funeral or memorial service. I wear liturgical garb mainly for my needs, not yours. I wear this not to impress you but to remind me of the role you have assigned me to assume among the

“laos,” the gathered people of God. Clergy may be called by God and ordained by the Church, but we are empowered by the people. At the less formal 10:30 a.m. chapel service, given its much smaller scale of engagement, I simply wear a suit and tie; the style of leadership is a bit different.

We all are ministers; we all are people of God commissioned by the love of Christ to serve others... out there more than in here.

Allegra is a cellist. She has a ministry; she even calls it that within the circle of laity, but not so much publicly. It might meet with resistance and it might be more difficult for her to get financial support for her 501.c3. She is in her 20's, and like all young and gifted musicians, she finds any symphony requests, any quartet gigs, and all solo opportunities that she can. But, her ministry – she has developed a cohort of musical friends who go with her to play in the patient's lounge in the cancer ward of the women's hospital. They play beautiful, maybe even healing, music in a setting of great stress. She and her friends share God's love through their music. Most of us are not gifted in that way to do that, but Allegra is, and most importantly, she does.

And they go to the children's hospital on weekend afternoons, set up in the sun room at the end of the hall, and primarily with rhythm instruments engage the kids in hours of excitement. For the children it is fun unlike they have had all week, for the parents it is a relief to see their children smile, for Allegra it is her service to God, using her God-given talents to set people free, if only for a brief time. The ministry of God's people.

Frank, the banker, a minister of Jesus Christ, though he does not wear a robe or stole at work. However, he has placed, he told me, John Wesley's rules about money somewhere for the staff to see: gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can. Frank is the son of a United Methodist minister from Mississippi. When he was the chair of the congregation's Board of Trustees, I suspect that he was the only one in history who would bring a small paper cup to the meetings so that he could discreetly spit tobacco juice into it.

In midlife, after working his way up to middle management in a huge banking conglomerate, Frank started his own bank, one-of-a-kind, Frank's Bank. He did not call it that; he called it Peoples' Bank, and it was clear to his many investors, his cadre of employees, and his thousands of customers that there was something special about this bank. The people mattered to Frank. When many banks failed a few years ago, Frank's bank survived, due in large part to Frank's vision that extended beyond the next quarterly report. And the village revered this bank because it gave back to the community . . . support of children's arts and enrichment programs, primarily.

Now, as Frank considers retirement, he is in the process of selling the bank. It is very troubling to him because there are not many buyers out there who buy into John Wesley's ethic of the use of money. And his customers are anxious because there are not many bank presidents who will treat them so fairly. And the employees are worried. When you move from having employees who have a stake in the business to having “labor costs,” you have lost a great deal of humanity. Frank is trying to take care of his people at the Peoples' Bank, the “Laos Bank.”

Our ministry is out there, putting into service every gift we have been granted by God. And we cannot do it for our own glory. James and John, Zebedee's sons, do not understand that. Even after Jesus tells them over and over that there will be no power and glory for them, at least in this life, and as an example Jesus forewarns them that he will be arrested, persecuted, and crucified for doing what is right, they still focus on what is in it for them. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “And, what might that be?” Jesus asks. “When you come into your glory at the head table in heaven, let us sit at your left and your right.”

They want to sit there and take a “selfie,” send it back home to Dad, and say, “See, we have amounted to something!” And Jesus replies, “You have no idea what you are talking about. In the secular world it is all about authority, a hierarchy of power, but in God's domain it is all about selflessness. Whoever will be great among you will be your servant.” How many times must Jesus tell his disciples that, and they still do not get it?

But then, do we really get it? There is no glory in being a servant. Where is the satisfaction when it is a thankless job? Barbara Brown Taylor, a wonderful preacher and observer of our era, writes about a young friend who had the unsettling experience of being kicked off the elevator by a grumpy resident of a high rise housing project for the elderly while he was delivering Christmas baskets. We know the feeling. “Hey, come on; I am doing something nice for you, and you can’t even be grateful?” I am sure that we experience that often in our outreach ministry when we offer food and clothing to people, and they do not say, “Thank you.”

Barbara Brown Taylor continues, “He finds the memory pretty funny now. A little further into his discipleship, he now knows that no good deed goes unpunished, but he still longs to be appreciated. He is still enticed by the idea that doing God’s work will make him glow in the dark so that everyone knows how special he is. It is a seductive idea, and he is not the only one who has fallen for it, is he? Still, it is a fiction, a figment of our own imaginations. What the Bible tells us over and over again – what our lives tell us – is that the only reward for doing God’s work is doing God’s work. Period.” (Bread of Angels, p.27-28)

Take that, James and John; take that, you and me. The joy comes in knowing that God can take us, with our gifts great and small, and use us in ways that we can never foretell to liberate many people. We, the people of God, the laity, can be of use even in the midst of our imperfections.

George, a former governor of Illinois, recently released from prison . . . did you know there is a prison compound with a wing reserved for Illinois governors? Okay, there is not, but I think three of the last five governors have gone to prison. George would attend worship at a church I was serving when he was not down in Springfield. He seemed to be an uncomplicated man in many ways, though he did contrive a motor vehicles department scheme that worked to his financial advantage. But while he was governor and before he went to prison, he ended the death penalty in Illinois.

At my invitation he addressed the congregation and explained that he could not continue to endorse the death penalty in the state when it was likely that a large proportion of those sitting on death row were innocent. In good faith, he could not continue to assign people to the gas chamber. George, an unlikely servant whom God used to set people free . . . if God can use George, God can use you and me.

We are the laity of the church, the people of God, “called through our baptism, to Christ’s ministry of servanthood in the world to the glory of God and for human fulfillment,” every one of us. There are no spectators here. We are in here together so that we can go out there into the world, together and individually, to use our God-given talents to liberate others. Do not expect any thanks. The only reward for doing God’s work is doing God’s work. Period. Amen.