

*Renewing Our Reconciling Community – Part Two*  
*October 14, 2007*

Some years ago in a large, urban church an attractive, affluent, middle aged couple called unexpectedly on their Senior Pastor. They began to explain to that pastor that they were transferring their membership to another church. The husband said, “Preacher, we just don’t feel fed by your sermons anymore. We are not inspired by worship here at First Church.” His wife piped in, “Yes, and our teenagers now find community with their schoolmates at another suburban church.” The husband said somewhat sadly, “We’ve just never found a Sunday School class that meets our needs with couples who we can connect with.” Although they had been members at First Church for many years they were going to be transferring their membership. The crusty old preacher had kept silent throughout the conversation and now sat up on the edge of his chair. He finally replied with an amazing candor: “Well maybe you should take off your bib and put on an apron!”

Losing oneself in Christian service – putting on the apron of humble servant leadership – is at the heart of our spiritual life. I am in the second week of my Stewardship sermon series entitled “Renewing our Reconciling Community.” Last week we looked at how we find reconciliation with God through worship. This week I want to explore how we are reconciled with ourselves – the Bering faith community – through service.

The Apostle Paul was the great church planter of the early Christian movement. In his letters we see just how passionate he was about the unity of the faithful. It is to Paul that we owe authorship of the image of the Body of Christ. In our lectionary text to

the church of Rome, one of the great theological treatises of the New Testament, Paul always comes back to the practical advice of how we are to get along as members of the church family. He urges the faithful to present their bodies as living sacrifices in their spiritual act of worship. In the end what unites us is not our assent to a set of intellectual doctrines, but how we live our lives in faithful service to each other and God. Paul goes on to list the spiritual gifts that are given by the Holy Spirit so that we can build up in unity the body of Christ. But right before that he cautions them to not think more highly of themselves than they should, but with sober humility.

I have to tell you that I have learned in sobriety the power of humble service in maintaining the spiritual life. The last step of the 12-step recovery model says that having had a spiritual awakening as a result of the earlier eleven steps, we took this message to other alcoholics, practicing these principals in all of our affairs. In other words the way in which we guard the inner, spiritual life is in the practice of loving service in the world. The paradox of attaining a serene inner life is to lose oneself in service to others. About one year into recovery I was asked by my sponsor to find meeting leaders for the next six months for the Friday morning meetings. That six months of leaders times four meetings a month for a 6:30 am meeting. I thought this might a difficult recruiting task. It took me just six phone calls. I asked six people to lead one month's meetings. Without exception here is what I would hear on the other end of the phone: "Of course I will serve. For I know that when I serve I will have the opportunity to reach newcomers who need to hear the message of recovery to stay alive. And my sobriety will be helped as well."

Humble service is the key to all human enterprise. I am convinced of it. In Jim Collins' best-selling book, *Good to Great* Collins explored with scientific precision what made good companies great. He identified companies whose stock performance outperformed the market 4:1. These are the best of the best in every industry segment. And do you know what he found? The CEO leaders of everyone of these companies combined humility of spirit with iron-clad will. They never boasted of their own prowess, but instead lifted up their people and sacrificed for their companies in simple, quiet ways. They were, in a word, servant leaders. Great churches share this attribute. They are committed to humble service and getting everyone involved in it. They value aprons over bibs. They value emptying themselves over filling their spiritual tanks.

Contrast this value to that of the culture around us where the prevailing value is quid pro quo – you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. It is a culture that values style over substance and being a prim Madonna over being a suffering servant. For it is in putting on our aprons that we are truly reconciled to each other in the faith community. For sometime now, under Tricia Lynn's leadership, we have been feeding the Houston homeless lunch at SEARCH. I have participated in this ministry three times now. Every time I find new fellowship with my fellow volunteers from Bering. I make friends down at the center. Some of the customers express gratitude and some don't. But getting thanked is not what it is about. It is serving God and neighbor – yes – but along the way I build stronger relationships within the Bering family.

In John's gospel we read the story about how Peter is reconciled to Jesus after his earlier denial. Three times Peter professes his love for Jesus. But catch this...what Jesus says in response is, "feed my sheep," that is, serve this community of faith gathered in

my name. Jesus also says that part of that reconciliation among the faithful is in being served as well. Sometimes it is harder to have our own feet washed than it is to wash the feet of another.

This pledge card is like the one you should have received in the mail this past week. It affords each of us to renew our community by making good on the pledge we made when we joined Bering Memorial UMC. We pledged our prayers, presence, gifts and service. In that pledge each of you were asked to find one place of Christian service. This year consider the one way you will serve Christ through the church. We've made it easy for you by giving you a line to check by the options. That might be serving lunch at SEARCH a few times a year. It might be singing in the choir. It might be being one of the chaperones for the new Open Gate Youth ministry. It might be washing dishes after Thursday night dinner. Whatever it is, imagine if every person in this body volunteered for just one thing. Think of the lives we could affect...think of the burnout that would be avoided by those that are frankly doing way too much...They would actually get to say "no" or step down from a few responsibilities. Now during this Stewardship emphasis some will be called to do more, and some will actually called to do less. I have a vision where every member of Christ's body here at Bering will present herself or himself as a living sacrifice to God, holy and pleasing.

In our Old Testament text from Leviticus the highest holy day – Yom Kippor – the Day of Atonement – was instituted. One priest, on behalf of all the people, would present himself before God for the reconciliation of all the people. He would put on the ephod of service before God while the people stood around at the Temple. I guess you could call those laypersons the first pew potatoes. But we have a new model of

reconciliation. You all are a priesthood of believers, equipped by the Spirit with gifts to all do incredible, reconciling work. Instead of an ephod, you have holy aprons, dressed for holy, humble service. You all are equipped with exactly what you need to serve humankind, God's family. You lack absolutely nothing. But my commitment to you in 2008 is that we are going to do a better job of preparing you for service. Very soon we will have a ministry guide that lists every volunteer position in the church, how much time it takes and what spiritual gifts are needed. In this vital equipping ministry of Discipleship we will help you discover your gifts, match your spiritual fingerprint to a needed volunteer service, and train you how to do it. If we can't find a volunteer ministry for your profile, we will create a new one. That is my commitment to you.

In 2008 it is my prayer that we will have no "pew potatoes" and no burned out volunteers. As balanced, fruitful, followers of Jesus Christ it is important to wear both a bib and an apron. We have to balance giving and receiving service. For as the Apostle Paul says, *Let us not please ourselves...(but) each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up our neighbor...for Christ (our leader) did not please Himself.*