

“In a Word: Service”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, September 20, 2015
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Mark 9:30-37

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, the words from sacred scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart. Touch, bless and transform all these into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today we celebrate the kickoff of our 2016 Stewardship Campaign. Today is the day where I am to stand before you and get you riled up and get you excited about the future, and get you excited about giving and you throw your pledge cards from your pews up into the front of the church and we are all just dancing around going, yeah, we've made it. We got all the money we need to now do what we are supposed to do. That's what I'm supposed to do today. Hmmmmm.

Instead I am going to ask you all a peculiar question. Why on earth did you call me and why do you pay me to be your pastor? There are times, more often now than in the past, when I feel like what I'm doing and what I'm trying to get us to do as a congregation is about 180 degrees away from what the culture and popular christendom are all about. You just heard an anthem sung in Latin! I don't know what church growth literature Bill is reading these days. I've not seen the article. Maybe it was buried in a foot note: to get a growing, thriving congregation, in the middle of the Bible belt, in the middle of the country, in the middle of St. Louis, sing an anthem in Latin. When the world is screaming at us to go build an auditorium with a stage and lights, to put bands and guitars and tambourines and bongos up in front of the church, we go 180 degrees in the opposite direction and instead put in a French symphonically voiced pipe organ. Our presbytery sent out some material this week about a clergy conference that's coming up. They want us to go and learn about our strengths, to find our strengths as leaders and to appropriate these strengths and this business model into the life of the church. This is what will build up our churches. And I think to myself, I want to run the other way. I don't want to know what my strengths are, I don't want to apply that philosophy to church. Instead I want to chew on the word a little bit more and understand what God's trying to invite us to be and to do.

And so it's in the context of this 180 degree sense of direction that I had an interesting week. I was working on putting together the stewardship letters that go out to anybody that's given to the ministry of Christ in the last year, and the logo that we've picked is a green tree. As I sat and looked at that letter, I thought, do you think anybody's going to think that we are trying to raise money for Green Tree—the church down the street? And the instant that I had that thought, I remembered a conversation that I had had with someone who came up to me—I think it was probably in January—and said, “Did you see that article in the high school newspaper about Green Tree building their new building and branching out?” and I said, “No, why?” They said, “There's a part at the end and I'm just kind of wondering, do you think they were talking about us?” I said, “I don't know.” The part at the end reads, *we at Green Tree Community Church have to be outward focused and not inward focused. We are not trying to build a castle in Kirkwood, we're trying to build a kingdom.* I don't know what the pastor meant by saying that, but the person I was talking to was convinced that somehow that was pointed at us Presbyterians of First Pres in Kirkwood. They were concerned that we were seen in the community as building a castle and that our focus was too inward instead of outward.

I don't know what our reputation is out in the world, of who we are and what we do. I for one am incredibly proud and honored to be a part of this congregation and the beauty of its buildings, its commitment to sacred worship and the investment in that that we have made as a community of faith. We have stepped out and said, *you know what? All that other kind of worship is fine and well and good for you but for us, we are going to do it differently.* And very unapologetically we do what we do because of who we are, and because of the vision that God has given to each of us. So mindful that it is the kickoff of Stewardship Month or Season, I want to do something very un-Presbyterian. I want to tell you a few stories about who we are and what we do. I'm going to wave the flag, if you will.

Several weeks ago, and I believe I mentioned this in a sermon, Rick Stream and another

gentleman came to visit me. Rick is member at Green Tree. He came to ask if I would help find volunteers for Hope Unlimited. It's a ministry that he and his wife, Ellen, are a significant part of. It works with students in Meacham Park and in that area. There are sports teams and all kinds of different programs that have mushroomed out of their commitment. They have an after school tutoring program and he wanted to know if I would help find volunteers to come and do that work on Monday nights. I said yes. I sent out an email and I heard nothing. Last week he was at one of the memorial services that we had. He called me aside and he said, "David, I need to tell you something." He was just talking off the top of his head, not really deliberate about any of this, but he said, "You need to know that we have gotten 6 volunteers from your congregation, and that's more than any other church in Kirkwood. Ellen and I were talking about that and she looked at me and said 'Rick, that's even more than Green Tree.'" I don't say that to pick on our neighbors down the road. I don't do that for any other reason than to tell you what you are up to in this community. The most volunteers from any community of faith in town. We are doing the work that God has invited us to do. And I am proud to tell you that as of this moment, I still do not know who those 6 are.

In 1996 Room at the Inn started in Kirkwood and it was here in this congregation. For the last 12 years Martha and Emmett Kaelble have committed themselves to making sure that this ministry would continue. Just this past year after Emmett's passing, Martha has decided that she needed help and needed to hand off the ministry and so she handed it off to Cindy Grone, who has come back to be part of our congregation again. And the ministry will continue. Next year it will be the 20th year that that ministry is in place. Martha, being the studious person that she is, went back and looked at the early documents of that ministry and found that Cindy Grone, when she was a member at First Pres back in the middle 90's was one of the first volunteers at Room at the Inn. The circle completes. We don't really know much about it, we don't hear all about it. We don't celebrate it. We don't have lights on it—it just happens.

I noticed this morning at 8:15 when I came in to worship, that there is a cabinet out there just outside the door with a little stand and it says "Kirk Care", and typically there are yellow plastic bags that you can take to put food in and bring it back. Every week Ken Koerber faithful shows up, very quietly takes the food from here, takes it to Kirk Care, the Kirkwood Food Pantry and Social Services place. Every week automatically. We don't hear about it. He doesn't come up and demand to be recognized for it. It just happens. What I noticed today was that there were no more yellow bags. Instead someone got blue bags, Schnucks bags, I think, and stuck them there. There are no more yellow bags because we as a congregation have taken them all and filled them with food.

Next week or in two weeks, I think, at some point soon, a group of volunteers working through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance will make their way to Conway, Arkansas, and do again what we have done year after year after year. They will build houses for people whose houses were destroyed by natural disaster. We will not celebrate, we will not trumpet, we will not call attention to who has volunteered. They will simply go and do what they do and return quietly.

I'm convinced that if Jesus were here now, alive, sharing the same gospel passage with us in today's English, he would say not the phrase of the last will be first and serve.... he would say to us, don't talk about it, just do it. That's why I'm proud to be part of who we are. Amen.