

Sermon for Zion, November 12, 2017

Hymns: 298 – Glory Be to God the Father; 300 – Glorify Thy Name; We will glorify;  
350 – To God Be The Glory

Scripture: Responsive Reading: Psalm 29; John 15:1-8; 1 Peter 4:7-11

Theme: “Five Solas – To The Glory of God Alone – Summary and Commitment”

*John 15:1-8 (PHILLIPS)*

*“I am the real vine, my Father is the vine-keeper. He removes any of my branches which are not bearing fruit and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit to increase its yield.*

*Now, you have already been pruned by my words. You must go on growing in me and I will grow in you. For just as the branch cannot bear any fruit unless it shares the life of the vine, so you can produce nothing unless you go on growing in me. I am the vine itself, you are the branches. It is the person who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful.*

*For the plain fact is that apart from me you can do nothing at all. The person who does not share my life is like a branch that is broken off and withers away. He becomes just like the dry sticks that men pick up and use for the firewood. But if you live your life in me, and my words live in your hearts, you can ask for whatever you like and it will come true for you.*

*This is how my Father will be glorified—in your becoming fruitful and being my disciples.*

*1 Peter 4:7-11 (NLT)*

*The end of the world is coming soon. Therefore, be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.*

*God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.*

General John de Chastelain, former Chief of Defense Staff and Ambassador to the United States, was telling me of his retirement plans, and the book he hoped to write. I don't often hang about with Generals and Ambassadors, but I know General de Chastelain through my friendship with his son Duncan and his family, and through baptising the General's grandchildren.

When next I saw him, his plans had changed. No longer entering a blissful retirement, General de Chastelain had just returned from a meeting with the Queen, and was now preparing to move to Ireland, to serve as Chairman of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, responsible for ensuring the decommissioning of arms by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. Hardly a retirement task, which promised only lots of hard work, a fair amount of danger, and not much in the way of thanks.

“Why on earth would you agree to take that on?” I asked him.

“It was Her Majesty’s request,” he said, as though that ended the conversation, which he doubtless hoped.

“But what’s in it for you?” I asked. This stumped him. He simply hadn’t previously considered that. It hadn’t entered into his decision. He looked at me, blinking, unable for a moment to answer what was to him a ridiculous question.

“It was Her Majesty’s request,” he said again, patiently, as though to a particularly simpleminded toddler. “I am able to be of service to Her Majesty. I am honoured to serve.”

I am, to this day, some twenty years later, still humbled by this response. Changing the entire direction of his life, altering all his future plans, all because of an opportunity to serve his Sovereign. And given the opportunity to serve, given the honour to serve, “What’s in it for me?” didn’t even enter his mind.

I, too, serve a Sovereign. Ultimately, the Sovereign I serve is no other than the Lord God Almighty, and I have been called into service by no less than Jesus Christ, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. And so have you. And it is our Saviour, King and Lord, Jesus Christ, who said, *“I have not come to be served, but to serve.”* And we, his followers, are called – commanded, even - to follow his example. We are here – we are called – we have been created – to reflect the life and work of Jesus, and so bring Glory to God.

Yet despite all that, I confess that when I am presented with the opportunity – or, let’s be honest here, the command - to serve, my first thought is often, “What’s in it for me?” Will this inconvenience me; with this cost me something; what will I get out of it? I am, I confess, a sinful man. It may be your confession, too.

Over the past 9 weeks, we have been looking at the Five Solas of the Reformation, the revolution of faith which gave birth to the Protestant church five

centuries ago, in whose lineage we today stand. We've gone back to the Scriptures, through which God and God's plan of salvation is made known (Sola Scriptura); we've come to understand that the gift of salvation comes to us not because we deserve God's gift, but because God, through Grace, offers it freely in love (Sola Gratia); we've been reminded that God's grace has come to us through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God (Solus Christus); we've been challenged to respond in faith, by believing in, trusting, and living in active response, following Jesus, our Saviour and Lord (Sola Fide); and today, we are reminded of the final Sola, which wraps it all up, and reveals our ultimate life purpose: "Soli Deo Gloria" - we live for the glory of God alone.

Soli Deo Gloria means simply this: Our fundamental life question as Christians is not, "What's in it for me?" Our fundamental life question as Christians is, "What's in it for God?" How do my decisions, my actions, my priorities, my life, give glory to God? Or, again back to Peter's words: *"God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another... Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ."* Or, if Peter isn't enough, there's Paul: *"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17)."* Or, as we heard from Jesus earlier, *"This is how my Father will be glorified—in your becoming fruitful and being my disciples,"* which I paraphrase as, *"It is when your service as my followers bears results to the benefit of others, that people will recognise who God is, and will turn to God in praise."* That is our purpose; that is why we're here.

This was brought home to me quite powerfully through what in my opinion remains perhaps the most important book written this century, Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life." Purpose number four of his "five life purposes" is entitled, "You Were Shaped For Serving God." I've preached on this before, and doubtless will again, for it is a lesson which I need to relearn, time and again. Warren challenges us in this way:

*You were put on earth to make a contribution. You weren't created just to consume resources - to eat, breathe, and take up space. God designed you to make a difference with your life. While many best-selling books offer advice on how to "get" the most out of life, that's not the reason God made you. You were created to "add" to life on earth, not just take from it. God wants you to give something back.*

*This is God's fourth purpose for your life, and it is called your "ministry," or service. Whenever you serve others in any way, you are actually serving God and fulfilling one of your purposes. It is why you were created.*

Warren reminds us that we were not only created to serve God, but we were saved to serve God, called to serve God, even commanded to serve God. It is absolutely central to our Christian identity.

In our Five Solas Bible studies and Sunday services, we were reminded of the cornerstone of the Reformation: that our salvation is dependent upon the grace of God, not upon whether our paltry collection of good works outweighs our bad. The good works we do as Christians, we do not do to earn our salvation, or to buy God's favour; instead, the good works we do are done in gratitude to God, who has freely and in grace given us his salvation and his love. Warren sums this up nicely in his phrase, "*You are not saved by service, but you are saved for service.*" He writes:

*In God's kingdom, you have a place, a purpose, a role, and a function to fulfil. This gives your life great significance and value. We don't serve God out of guilt or fear or even duty, but out of joy, and deep gratitude for what he's done for us. We owe him our lives.*

*In the Bible, the words servant and minister are synonyms, as are service and ministry. If you are a Christian, you are a minister, and when you're serving, you're ministering.*

*We are healed to help others. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are saved to serve, not to sit around and wait for heaven. God has a ministry for you in his church and a mission for you in the world.*

Even as we were saved to serve God, we are called to serve God. We in the Presbyterian Church have a strong theology of "Call." We believe that God calls each of us, and not just the professionals like me, to lives of Christian service, no matter what our jobs might be. The baker is called to bake bread to the Glory of God. The teacher is called to teach kindly, lovingly and well, to the Glory of God. The farmer is called to plant and tend and harvest conscientiously and to the Glory of God. These are all callings. All of us are called. As Warren reminds us:

*Your call to salvation included your call to service. They are the same. Regardless of your job or career, you are called to full-time Christian service. A "non-serving Christian" is a contradiction in terms. Any time you use your God-given abilities to help others, you are fulfilling your calling.*

*Your service is desperately needed in the Body of Christ - just ask any local church. Each of us has a role to play and every role is important. There is no small service to God - it all matters.*

*Likewise, there are no insignificant ministries in the church. Small or hidden ministries often make the biggest difference.*

*Today thousands of local churches are dying because of Christians who are unwilling to serve. They sit on the sidelines as spectators, and the Body suffers.*

Listen to that last line again: *“Today thousands of local churches are dying because of Christians who are unwilling to serve. They sit on the sidelines as spectators, and the Body suffers.”* In contrast, Warren tells of a church in China who, when welcoming new members, welcomes them with these words: *“Jesus now has a new pair of eyes to see with, new ears to listen with, new hands to help with, and a new heart to love others with.”* We are called to be the eyes, ears, hands and heart of Jesus in our world. We are called to be the Body of Christ.

We are not only saved to serve God, not only called to serve God. We are commanded to serve God.

Jesus said, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:34-35 NRSV) And Jesus reminds us time and again that we express that love to one another through service to one another and our world.

For Christians, service is not optional, something to be tacked onto our schedules if we can spare the time. It is the heart of the Christian life. Serving and giving sum up God’s purpose for your life.

*We were, each one of us, put on earth to make a contribution. We were, each one of us, created to serve God, saved to serve God, called to serve God, even commanded to serve God. It is the heart of the Christian life. It is absolutely central to our Christian identity. A non-serving Christian is a contradiction in terms. A Christian who does not serve is like a fish who does not swim. For it is in serving that we give Glory to God. It is in service that our purpose is fulfilled.*

If Christianity is all about us – if salvation is only about “what’s in it for me,” it becomes an intensely selfish religion. If Christianity is all about whether we ourselves get into heaven, about whether we ourselves have peace and joy and hope and love, about whether we ourselves receive blessings beyond number – if Christianity is only about what we get out of it, then it’s all about me. It places us, and not God, at the centre of our universe. Distorted in this way, it would be the most selfish, the most greedy, of faiths. Sadly, it often has been. Sadly, it often is.

Yet if we look to Jesus, we see the least selfish, the least greedy, the least egotistical of any who have ever walked this earth. If we look to Jesus, we see one who gave all for the sake of others. If we look to Jesus, we see one who rejected personal gain, who possessed not even a pillow for his head, who forsook the blessings of even family and home for the sake of others. If we look to Jesus, we see one who gave his very life, for the salvation of all, and to the Glory of God.

Without Soli Deo Gloria, our lives are out of balance, our faith is self-centred, our universe is out of whack. But focussed on bringing Glory to God through service to others, our Christianity becomes what it was meant to be – a light in the darkness of our world, a reflection of Jesus Christ, pointing all to the loving arms of our glorious God.

We are, as faithfully revealed by the Scriptures, saved by grace, through faith, in Jesus, to the Glory of God. We are made for a purpose, saved for a purpose, called and equipped for a purpose, and that purpose is to bring Glory to God, through the service of others, both inside and outside the doors of the church.

What's in it for me? I am able, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to be of service to His Majesty. I have the honour of serving the King - by grace, through faith, in Jesus, to the Glory of God.

And so, in response to the Five Solas, and as a Reformation People, consider joining in this prayer with me:

Father, we confess that we are a selfish people.  
We confess that we ask, "What's in it for me?"  
We confess that we think of our faith as personal, as private,  
    And not as something to be joyfully shared.  
We confess that we are reluctant to serve,  
    That we are more comfortable as spectators,  
    Content to let others do your work.  
Yet we also declare that we are saved by grace, through faith,  
    In Jesus, to the Glory of God.  
Revive our dormant faith. Awaken us to our calling.  
    Renew our commitment. Enlarge our vision.  
Open our ears to your voice, our eyes to see need.  
    Open our hearts and hands to those whom we can serve.  
May we commit our time, our talents, our resources,  
    Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, to the Glory of God our Father,  
    In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.