

Embracing an Endless Line of Servants
1 Corinthians 3:5-23

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All the world's a stage and all men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts, said William Shakespeare.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: I planted a seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. On this All Saints Sunday, let us consider this stage of life where many have played their parts upon our lives and have made a dramatic difference.

What I want to say to you is really contained in two simple statements. We are recipients; we are receivers. Many others have played upon our lives. We are not alone in this world. Others have paved the way. The longer I live, the more I long for a single word to shape my life. That single word is gratitude. We are not born grateful. It is learned behavior. We are born saying hold me, feed me, change me, rock me. Ask any young parent here; they will tell you how demanding a baby can be. The art of maturity is the movement from grabbing to giving, from grumbling to gratitude, from self-centeredness to servant mindedness. Are you making that transition in your life?

Dr. Sol Toy taught anthropology at the University of Chicago. One day he was walking across campus with his granddaughter on his shoulders. A colleague who had seen them earlier while the child was still walking on the ground, said to the little girl, "My how you have grown." The kid in a moment of honesty replied, "Not really, not all of this is me."

Every week when I step into this pulpit I am reminded that not all of this is me. When I count my blessings, I am reminded that not all of this is me. When I number my friends, I am reminded that not all of this is me. We are surrounded by an endless line of servants who put our needs ahead of theirs. They are parents who made a way and spouses who decided to stay, mentors who taught us skills and friends who were around for more than a thrill. While some of their haloes were tilted and we might be hesitant to call them saints, nevertheless, they surround us today as a great cloud of witnesses on the grand stage of life cheering us on to completion. We do not live by ghosts and goblins. We live by the saints and the legends. It's grace that has seen us through the toils and troubles of our days and has empowered us to keep on keeping on.

Mr. Holland's Opus is a touching movie about a high school teacher in Portland, Oregon. Mr. Holland really wants to achieve critical fame as a classical musician, but the pressure of making a living, raising a family, dealing with a deaf son, resisting the temptations of a seductive student, and handling the music program cut-backs of the school board, denies him the opportunity of pursuing his dream.

So for a lifetime, he drags to school and teaches less than enthusiastic high school students music, until one day the music program is eliminated completely and here, a man after thirty years is jobless. At the depths of his despair, Mr. Holland is invited to the school auditorium. To his complete surprise the place is packed with former students who have assembled to honor him. In what he thought was marking time, he had made a lasting impression upon the lives of others. Their lives had been shaped and formed by his faithfulness, and his students were thankful.

It is grace that has seen us safe this far. We have made it, you and I, for twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, or ninety years; we have lived and moved and had our being. There were times we never thought we would and nearly didn't make it. There were times we almost hoped we wouldn't make it and we were ready to give up on the whole thing, but we didn't. We hung in there and that has made all the difference.

Weak as we are, we found God to be our refuge and strength and a very present help in trouble. Foolish as we are, we discovered wisdom from on high in a moment when we didn't expect it. As faint of heart as we are, there came love from beyond to keep our hearts alive.

Some people sit down on memorable days like that and thank their lucky stars, but I choose to bow on my knees and thank my loving God who has carried me safe this far and will lead me finally home. We are recipients, you and I, on the stage of life.

The second three words I want to leave with you come from today's text, as well. We are responsible. Verse 10: *"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. Each one should be careful how he builds."* In our moments on the stage of life, you and I are responsible for the faith we proclaim and the life we live. Paul gives some very specific instructions on how to be faithful and how to live as responsible people. "Focus on the foundation," he said.

In the Coalinga earthquake, builders discovered that houses bolted to their foundation could withstand the earth trembling up to an 8.2 on the Richter scale because they were bolted to the foundation. Have you such an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll? How is it we sing it sometimes?

*Our hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus Name.
On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Have you found that kind of anchor? Pay attention to the foundation because you are going to need a good foundation in the world. Make sure it's solid.

Once more the bishops of our church are engaged in a feverish debate concerning the nature of Christ. Was He really born of the Virgin Mary? How does the Cross really atone for our sins? Did He actually rise from the dead? I don't want to make light of such arguments, but such questions are not new. Heresies have chipped away at the Church since the first century. Truth stands the test of time and the attacks of egotistical individuals.

In the meantime let me say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilot and was crucified dead and buried. The third day he arose from the dead. He ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. Because I believe in Jesus Christ, I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." I believe today.

I believe it not because I have climbed the ladder of ecclesiastical leadership, nor plunged to the depths of some theological discussion. I believe today because on the highways and byways of life where I am privileged to enter the hearts and minds of people like you, there is an everlasting need to know our sins are forgiven, to have our faith affirmed, to bury our dead in the sure and certain hope that we shall one day rise to be with Christ in another world. Check your foundation. Is it solid? Will it stand the storms of time? You are going to need it, a solid foundation.

Something else Paul says here in Corinthians. Use good materials. Don't build your house with shoddy stuff.

Once upon a time there were three little pigs. The first little pig built his house of straw. The big wolf came and blew his house down. The second little pig built his house of sticks. The big wolf came and blew his house down. The third little pig, smarter than all the rest of the pigs, built his house of bricks. The big wolf came. He huffed and he puffed. He puffed and he huffed, but he could not blow the brick house down because that pig was smart enough to use good stuff. The little pig lived happily ever after.

Saint Paul does a miraculous thing. He talks about this building and then he suddenly personalizes it. Verse 16: *"Don't you know, that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you?"* What kind of materials are you using to build a dwelling place for God? What kind of life materials are you using to build a life worthy of the saints of God?

Sometimes I like to sing *"Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary pure and holy, tried and true, with Thanksgiving I will be a living sanctuary for you."*

Would you sing it with me as we prepare for communion?