

13th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland WA
Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton

In a fairly short while you are going to have an opportunity! Now does that sound like a car salesman, or what?!!

It's an opportunity to visit our annual "ministry fair." There - if you go and look (and I urge you to do so!) - you'll see a lot of ways you can be active in our congregation's common life.

In addition to the internal ministries there are external ones too - and there's always room for more! If you have an idea or a suggestion (and you're prepared to be a part of turning your idea or suggestion into reality) you only need to speak up!

This ministry fair is about you! Why? Well, because you are a minister!

Now that's an interesting word, "minister" - anyone know what it means? It comes from a Latin word that's spelt exactly the same way we spell it today in English. That Latin word's translated into English as "servant."

Ministers are servants. That's only right - Jesus, in Mark's Gospel - says that we are called to be servants of all (9:35).

Of course, there are problems with that word! We don't live in a culture where servanthood exists in the same way it existed in the 1st Century! Servants were slaves, they were owned, they were "non-persons" who were at the beck and call of their owners, who could have them killed without a second thought.

I imagine the reason that the word "minister/servant" was used by Jesus, and repeated in the gospels is because many of the early followers of Jesus came from the same class - peasants and slaves - and they would fully understand what the word meant!

So what does that word mean for us today? Well, if you look up the word "minister" you'll likely find multiple definitions, some religious, some secular. The secular often has to do with someone who works as an accredited representative of a government, or - if you live in a country with a constitutional monarchy, like Britain - the minister works as an accredited representative of the monarch. So you get a "minister of state for finance" or something like that.

The religious definition goes like this: "a person authorized to conduct services" or "a person authorized to administer the sacraments."

And that's what the word meant, until the last 30 years: a member of the clergy.

Dictionaries don't understand baptism! At least, not completely! The first three words of the religious definition are correct: A minister is "a person authorized."

So here's my question to you: "authorized" by what, or by who? By God, through baptism. When I was chair of the Diocesan Commission on Ministry in the Diocese of Indianapolis I had 300 button-badges printed: yellow, with red writing (the colors don't actually mean anything - I just like them!). The writing said "Authorized Minister" and the word "minister" had an asterisk after it. Beneath those two words was the explanation of the asterisk; it said "by baptism."

Every one of you who has been baptized has been authorized by God to be a minister. And every time you repeat the baptismal covenant you confirm that authorization, you say "I accept that authorization."

We're all saying, we're "servants for God" - we're acknowledging our role as creatures of the Creator.

Language is a tricky thing, isn't it?! Not only does the word "minister" get misunderstood, so does the word "Church". Scholars most often use the word "Church" to translate the Greek word "*ekklesia*" - it's also where we get words like "ecclesial" and "ecclesiastical" from. Paul uses that word frequently, which has led many scholars to refer to the various communities he founded as Churches. But that's not what Paul intended. The word "*ekklesia*" was actually used widely in Paul's time - it meant "political assembly" - every community had one and it wasn't a religious gathering. The way Paul differentiated his political assemblies' s from the local community's political assemblies was to add two words: "*en Christo*"...."in Christ." All of the communities that Paul wrote to he considered "political assemblies in Christ" - meaning that they should be fully engaged in the entirety of the life of their local community, but that they should be engaged in the context that they had been "baptized into Christ," that they were "in Christ." Their servanthood wasn't just within their own assembly, it was in the whole community.

So how do we exercise that servanthood? Do you remember the two great commandments? 8 o'clockers are pretty good at this, because they used to hear these two repeated every week! "The first great commandment is this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments all faith hangs."

We are called to be servants of love - not just within the walls of this place, but outside it, too.

Now before you get all gooey on me I want to say that we need to be cautious about that word "love." Of course it can mean romantic love. But that's not how it's used in the gospels. I've heard it described like this when attributed to God: "God's providential care of and for the world."

St. Paul saw it as an active way of changing the world, but only when that love was "in Christ".

So my invitation to you is to see yourself for what you have been made: a minister, which is a servant - and then consider ways in which you can serve not only this community of faith, but the world beyond it. Amen.