

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 “Common Purpose”

Today is the first day of Week of Compassion. Well that’s nice preacher. So what’s the deal? We have to be nice this week? Does that mean we get to be horrible and selfish for the other 51 weeks of the year? No. Week of Compassion isn’t just dates on a calendar. Week of Compassion is the name of our church’s national disaster relief organization. It started back in the early 1940s because World War II had created multiple global humanitarian crises. So the International Convention (General Assembly) of the Christian Church made two recommendations regarding multiple aid and relief projects around the world. It wasn’t just a “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” thing either. The recommendations made room for partnerships with several church ministries. So the Convention designated a “Day of Compassion” where Disciples congregations would hold a special offering to raise funds to support these relief efforts.

Not long thereafter, in 1943, the International Convention approved a “Wartime Service Fund.” They figured a *day* of compassion just wasn’t enough, so they designated a “Week of Compassion” which raised \$250,000 for ongoing support of these relief efforts. That was big money in 1943, especially when you consider how people were already tapped financially because of the war.

After the War, Week of Compassion decided humanitarian aid was all fine and good, but they wanted to include disaster response *and* aid for refugee resettlement too. Up to this point, Week of Compassion was run by volunteers. Then the Christian Church hired a full-time executive director and over the years kept adding staff to help expand the reach of the ministry. The amount of money that was raised started to increase. It went from a couple of hundred thousand dollars to millions of dollars. Week of Compassion also began partnering with other denominations which was a radical notion 70 years ago.

I was fairly new to the faith when I discovered the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in college. I was aware of Week of Compassion, but for me it just seemed like it was another “do-gooders helping poor people in third world countries” type of ministry. This was back during a time when Sally Struthers was appearing on TV every half-hour making appeals for people to help “starving children in Africa,” so it really didn’t catch my attention. I just knew that it was a ministry in the church that received a special offering around Valentine’s Day. Then in 1994 I got an up-close and personal education about what Week of Compassion was all about.

I was the pastor of the First Christian Church in Pearisburg, Virginia for 6 years during my time in seminary and a few years after. It was located in Giles County, Virginia which was in the New River Valley. This was in the Appalachian Mountains which were prone to heavy thundershowers during the Summer months. In 1994, one of those thunderstorms hit Pearisburg and dumped 5 inches of rain in just a matter of a few hours. Pearisburg was at the foot of a mountain called “Angel’s Rest.” The mountain was only 3,700 feet high, but that was pretty respectable for that part of the country. What happened during that big rain storm is that the water that came off the mountain carved a huge channel right into the Southeast part of town. It looked like a waterfall coming off the mountain. One of our church members’ house happened to be in the way of that channel. The force of the water was so great that it knocked part of one of her basement walls completely off the foundation. This was an older woman who lived alone too, so it was pretty traumatic for her.

The next day, I got a call from a man named Johnny Wray from Week of Compassion. He said that he heard about the storm that hit Pearisburg and wondered if all my church folks were okay. And I had to think about this for a minute. Who is this, “Johnny Wray?” And isn’t Week of Compassion the outfit that helps starving kids in Africa or something? Come to find out, Johnny Wray was the executive director of Week of Compassion at the time, and he heard about the storm all the way up in

Indiana. He also noticed there was a Disciples Church in Pearisburg, so he thought he'd call. I told him about the woman whose house was damaged, and he said, "I'll see what I can do." The next day, Fed Ex dropped a check off to the church for \$1,700 for this woman to use for whatever she needed ... temporary lodging, food, water ... whatever. And this was back in pre-cell phone, slow internet days! Eventually, when I started working for the Regional Church in Virginia, I learned a lot more about Week of Compassion, and dealt with them on numerous occasions when our churches were affected by floods, fires, tornados, hurricanes and other disasters. After Johnny retired, Amy Gopp became director of Week of Compassion, and I believe she came here to preach in either 2008 or 2009 for Week of Compassion. Now, my friend Vy Ngyuen is Executive Director, and he and Caroline Hamilton-Arnold have been working very closely with our community throughout the Camp Fire disaster. They even helped our church with our little flood disaster that happened here last April.

In the church, we often talk about how important the concept of the "priesthood of all believers" is in our tradition. We believe that everyone who follows Jesus carries a responsibility for the church's ministry. Each of us serves according to the gifts God has given us. God invites us to serve by freely sharing our gifts with others. The passage that Barbara read this morning gives us a clear picture of the style of leadership that God calls the church to. Verse five says, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? *Servants* through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each." So we're talking about "servant leadership" here. That's the word that Paul used. Want to know the Greek word that we translate as "servant?" Diakanos. That's where we get the word "deacon." Deacon? Says here in the bulletin that Boyd Joslyn is the deacon this month. Does that mean we all need to be like Boyd? Well ... funny you should ask that.

Paul uses the term "deacon" or "servant" to describe someone whose work may be of benefit to others. Specifically in this context, he describes someone whose efforts God may use as a channel for growth.

In choosing to humbly give their gifts, “servant leaders” or “deacons” become channels of God’s healing love, so that all may enjoy the powerful experience of shared value, shared worth and investment. When we work and share our gifts together, none of us has to be Paul or Apollos or any other famous leader in order to be faithful to the responsibilities we’ve been given. None of us is expected to solve all the problems of the world alone, or even as individual churches. Rather, we are called to use the time, talent, and resources we have been given for the opportunities before us. In doing so, we have the joyful opportunity to participate in the growth God is already up to in the world. Week of Compassion works through a global network of partners so that none of us has to do this work alone. Strong relationships are at the heart of his shared ministry, recognizing that true servant leadership empowers each person and community to use the gifts they’ve been given.

Here’s another Greek lesson for you. In the NRSV, the version that Barbara read from, verse 9 says, “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.” I like the NIV’s translation a little better – “For we are *co-workers* in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.” I like the NIV better, because it uses the term, “co-workers” instead of “servants” or “fellow servants” like other versions. When you read the NRSV, you see “servant” up in verse 5, which we know is “diakonia,” so you’d think “servant” in verse 9 must be diakonia too. But it’s not. The Greek word here is, “synergoi,” which is where we get the English word, “synergy.” Synergy is the interaction of two contributions – which, when combined, produce a greater effect than the simple sum of those contributions. When we give to Week of Compassion, our gifts join with others’ gifts and the effects multiply exponentially as God gives growth.

What do you need to grow a good garden? You need good soil. Good gardeners know that you need to balance the varieties of plants so that everything will have what it needs to thrive and bear fruit. If the balance of the soil is off, all the plants in the garden suffer. Keeping that balance

does not mean treating all plants the same, though. It means giving each plant what it needs. As co-workers in God's garden, when we share in the work of Week of Compassion, we make an investment in the future and receive abundant blessings in return. But we don't do it *just* for the abundant blessings. That's not the currency we're after. Yeah, if we invest in the stock market or a retirement account, we expect to receive benefits. That's the capital. God's economy is different though. Yes, we will receive abundant blessings, but maybe not in the way or even the time we would expect. Rubem Alves, a Brazilian theologian once wrote, "We must live for the love of what we may never see." It's like the old farmer who planted an apple seed. He may not live to see the day where that tree bears fruit or provides shade, but he plants it anyway. He does it for the love of what he may never see.

In this letter, Paul is telling the Christians in Corinth to give and grow without undue attachment or ownership to the end result. It doesn't matter who takes credit for the work. It doesn't matter if Paul gets credit or Apollos or St. Peter or Chad the sandal maker. It ... doesn't ... matter. What does matter is that the followers of Jesus in Corinth bear the fruit God has called them to grow. We have been called to bear the Good News of Jesus in this world.

One of the things that Week of Compassion helped our community do is launch Resilience Resources, a combined ministry of our church, the Unitarians, the Methodists, St. John's Episcopal, Faith Lutheran, Congregation Beth Israel, First Baptist Church and the Center for Spiritual Living. The group has been providing counseling groups for Camp Fire survivors since last Summer. Sandi John, Sharon Salz, Barbara Soles, Bob Winkles, and our own Mary Kearns have been some of the counselors who've led these groups. In fact, Mary is starting her third 10-week group this afternoon. This is synergy. This is servanthood. When we invest in each other and in each other's futures, we delight in knowing that we take part of God's holy work of growing and thriving and celebrate the profound joy of living for the love of what we may never see.