

Read 1 Corinthians 16:13-24

This a special year for me. Sixty years ago last May I began my ministry in Hensall, ON near the shores of Lake Huron, and after a few stops in Ontario and Manitoba, we returned to Vankoughnet, where I had served as a student minister for five summers prior to 1959.

The Sunday before my second retirement [ministers are not the only ones who never retire. Gone are the days when people held one job, got a gold watch at the end of it, and spent the rest of their days on a rocking chair watching the world go by.] Be that as it may, the Sunday before my second retirement from St. Andrew's Church, in downtown Toronto, I was leading worship for my son and daughter in law at Thornhill Presbyterian Church.

In my children's message, I said to them, this is a sad time in our home...after next Sunday, I will no longer have a job as minister. What am I going to do? One boy said to me – "you can always go shopping!" I said, "thank you for your suggestion, if I do too much of that, I'll soon run out of money."

Another little boy said: "you can travel!" I said "thank you for that, but that too takes money." A girl in her teens, sensing that I was desperate, and that I needed help, she suggested that I build a new church. I thanked her and said if I were younger, I would do that. Feeling sorry for me, a little boy said to me, "I think you should go to a nursing home."

Nine years later, I still don't like shopping, my travels are limited to places in Ontario, Manitoba where my daughter lives, and Ohio where my younger brother makes his home. I have not started a new church, but I am having a lot of fun at St. David's, Vankoughnet where I live. So far, I have managed to keep my name off any waiting lists for a nursing home, nor have I been called to a bar.

On this Thanksgiving weekend I am blending my voice with yours as we sing together: “Now thank we all our God!” In addition to being thankful for family and friends, for shelter and food, for health and strength, I am especially thankful to God for individuals who have responded to the Gospel message in the various congregations I had the privilege of serving, and acted on it.

I am thankful to God for all those who have had epiphany like experiences and said: Aha! Now I get it. For all those who said: “Once I was blind but now I see!” I am grateful to all those who did not only say “Amen” at the end of worship services, but have been, and still are witnesses for Christ where they live, work and socialize.

I want to share with you three representative examples which give me a reason to be thankful today after 60 years of involvement in Christ’s ministry. After all is said and done, it is Christ’s ministry we are all engaged in.

We were studying the letter to the Ephesians in one of my former congregations.

Forty-five of us met on five successive Sunday evenings as we worked our way through the Letter to the Ephesians. This particular night we were challenged to **see people**. Not numbers, not clients, not customers, not units, but people. One of the men, who happened to be the deputy minister of Health for the province of Manitoba, said to the group, “but I don’t see people, all I see is requests coming across my desk requiring funding for additions to hospitals, for more doctors and nurses, for more equipment; I never see people.”

I recall saying to him at the time, “I don’t know anything about your job and what it entails, all I know is that this section is challenging us to see people.

A month went by, when the same man came to me and said that he had spent most of that day visiting some of the nursing homes in the north end of the city, and that he would do the same thing tomorrow. Not long after that, the ministry of health introduced the necessary changes to improve the conditions where people lived. The Word of God challenged my friend “to see people as never before, and for that I am thankful.

Here is my second example.

Prior to leaving one of my congregations, I arranged to have lunch with one of the members, and since I was paying for his lunch, I could ask him anything.

My question to him was – “how should I go about my ministry in the context of my new congregation?” His answer was simple and direct. Keep reminding the members of your congregation that each of them is a minister, and then encourage them and equip to go about their ministry.

Need I tell you that this individual practised what he preached. He had 700 people under him and whenever one of them was in trouble, he was right there to show his support. He would share a word of sympathy when someone lost a member of his/her family. He would make himself available to offer counsel when someone was going through separation or divorce. In brief he was a minister to them. He was putting to practice one of the Reformation slogans, the “priesthood of al believers”.

My third and final example took place at St. David’s Vankoughnet. It happened three summers ago following a Sunday worship. On that

Sunday I based my message on the Parable of the three servants in Matthew chapter 25. “Once there was a man who was about to leave home on a trip; he called his servants and put them in charge of his property. He gave to each according to his ability: to one he gave 5,000 gold coins, to another he gave 2,000, and to another he gave 1,000.” Upon his return, the ones that received the 5,000 and 2,000 gold coins doubled those amounts, while the one who received 1,000 gold coins went and hid his money in the ground. The Manager praised the first two and called the third one “bad and lazy servant”. I did point out in my message that the manager was hard on the servant with 1,000 talents not because he didn’t have as much as the other two, but because he did not invest his talent.

During the coffee hour one person said to me that she still thought the manager was hard on the man with 1,000 coins, period. Another person said to me “I have been saying no to a challenge that was presented to me in my home congregation, when I return this fall, I will offer my services. Today, I am thankful to God for similar responses to the preaching of the Gospel.

Jesus said: **“I am the vine, you are the branches.....My father’s glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.”** [John 15]

Jesus also said: **“Let your light shine before people, so that they may see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven,”** [Matthew 5:16]

The Letter of James states: **“Faith without actions is dead.”**
[James 2:26] It’s not either or, but both.

I have just given you three examples of individuals who believed and governed their life accordingly. What services are you rendering? What

“deeds of love and mercy” [to use a line from a hymn,] am I performing, to let others know that I am a disciple of Jesus? What fine example are we setting that would cause people in the future to remember us, and give thanks?

I conclude with the words of Etienne de Grellet. “I shall pass through this world but once, any good therefore that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being; let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

“And now to Him, who by His power at work in each of us is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory and honor, now and always.” [Ephesians 3:20]

This sermon was delivered by the Rev. Dr. George C. Vais, retired Presbyterian, on Thanksgiving Sunday, 2019 at Lake Joseph Community Church

