

**“Equipping the Saints”**

**Ephesians 4.1–16**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 6 August 2006**

Have you ever thought about it that way? Have you ever considered that you were “given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift?” That’s pretty monumental. As you might have inferred from my email last week, each of you is a minister of the good news of the kingdom of God, and you are called (*yes, called*) to some aspect of that ministry.

So, what are the gifts Christ has left you? In other words, what are the qualities, abilities, awareness, passions, visions that you have as a result of being part of this faith tradition? Before you say, “none, really” let me ask you some questions:

When was the last time you made someone laugh?

When was the last time you prepared a meal for someone, even if it was your own child?

When did you visit an ill friend or fellow member?

When did you let someone know, either through word or deed, that you loved them?

When was the last time you prayed for someone?

When was the last time you were an encourager, cheerleader, or guide for someone who needed a boost?

Each of these gifts can be a reflection of what hymnwriter Richard Gillard calls “the Christlight” within you. The Christlight: the spark of complete humanity, which is possible for us all. Have you ever noticed “the Christlight” in someone? Have you felt the goodness of their spirit spilling out all over the place? I’ve seen it here at Plymouth. (And though I call it a Christlight in my tradition, I’ve also seen that same spirit in people from other faith traditions.)

We all have it, or have the potential for it, within ourselves. It may begin only as a spark, so it needs to be coaxed into growing into a flame. Perhaps you had a Sunday School teacher or a mentor who saw the spark in you, who added some tinder and blew on the spark, which then caught and developing into an illuminating beacon. That’s one of the key things we can do for one another in a faith community: to see the Christlight in each other and then help one another to develop it.

I had a sense of the Christlight in Julie right away, and I have a strong hunch that you will be lighting a lot of fires around Plymouth in the coming years. And the cool/scary thing is that we and the kids in our congregation get to be the fuel for that Christlight!



One of the ways I perceive my ministry – and Sharon’s and Julie’s as well as Carrie’s, Jan’s and Donna Solverud’s – is not so much that we *do* ministry, as we “equip the saints for ministry.” (I know you haven’t always thought of your spouse or partner as saintly, but let’s assume the best! Saints are all around us!)

How do we do this? Well, we start by listening to you: not just what you say you want, but also the undercurrents of the message that let us know what you need. For instance, you may not know that you need to talk with someone about a difficult life event, but Sharon might notice that you’re not quite yourself and follow up with you.

We minister, not by *doing* things for you all the time, but by encouraging *you* to do things. For example, you may have thought that you could never be a regular visitor to someone in a nursing home, but with training and support through our Calling/Caring Ministry, you might surprise yourself.

One of the things that interests me about parish ministry, particularly at Plymouth, is the incredible power in giving people permission to do things. Maybe you came from a tradition in which laypeople never read the scripture, especially the gospel. *You can do that!* It could be that you didn't think you had a good singing voice until you ventured to sing even more boldly during worship. Perhaps you thought you needed a clergy person's involvement in selecting a replacement furnace. I've got news: they didn't teach us much about HVAC in divinity school.

All of this isn't to say that Sharon and I are superfluous! If we're all servants – ministers – what is distinctive about ordained ministry? For me it boils down to vocation, responsibility, and accountability. We are called, as the writer of Ephesians says, to be “pastor and teacher.” We are responsible for administering the sacraments and designing worship and being your spiritual guides as we walk together. And through our covenants with you, with the Northeast Association, the UCC, and the wider church, we are accountable to you.

We sometimes play down the idea of pastoral authority in the UCC, but like it or not, it's there. Here's a small example: the stole is the symbol of ordained ministry, and yet at our General Synod, we often see lay leaders wearing stoles, because we want everyone to be equal...but though we all have different gifts for ministry, ordained ministry is distinctive in the church. And when a minister does not recognize his or her role in the congregation and the authority the office carries, it's a recipe for disaster, whether it's pastoral misconduct or not helping the church to be all that it can.



I want to share a story with you about young laypeople hearing a calling. Two hundred years ago this week, on August 1, 1806 in Williamstown, Massachusetts, five young men who were students at Williams College (Sarah Burnett's alma mater) were caught in the middle of a field during a violent thunderstorm. Their names were Byram Green, Harvey Loomis, Samuel J. Mills, James Richards, and Francis L. Robbins. They had been having an open-air prayer meeting when a storm blew in. Together, they sought shelter under a huge haystack, and while there, they decided that they had gifts and a call.

Imagine, a group of guys in their late teens and early 20s – Congregationalists to boot – coming up with the idea that they were called to serve. Their vision was to bring the blessings of their faith to those who had never encountered it before. And together with First Church in Williamstown, they used their enthusiasm to start the first international missionary movement in the United States: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, or the ABCFM, which was founded in 1810 as a result of the efforts of these young men who had a prayer meeting under a haystack.

Their ABCFM's first missionary endeavor was in 1812 to Sri Lanka, which was then called Ceylon. It would be a pretty big deal if today a group of UCC college students decided to start a missionary endeavor with the Tamils, but now you can fly to Sri Lanka in 20 hours. At that time, it took over three months to sail there. And it was outrageously expensive and not without risk. But, taking their God-given gifts and their call, these young people decided to do something dramatic. Their rallying cry was “We can...if we will.” I want you to remember that phrase: “We can...if we will.”

Our ideas of mission have changed over the years. We no longer emphasize asking people from different cultures to see the gospel through *our* lenses. Rather, we go out as witnesses to our faith, to do what Jesus did...not “converting the heathen,” but rather *tikkun olam* – healing God's world. From the very beginning, Congregational missionary endeavors included education, medical treatment and training, and

agricultural improvement. (If this sounds familiar, these are root causes of poverty and hunger that I spoke about last week.)

And they included introduction to the Christian faith. It is easy and common for us to ascribe notions of cultural hegemony and colonialism to early missionary endeavors, and surely mistakes were made. But, if we are to be good historians, we cannot superimpose our 21st century values on 19th century Christians. But we can say that even by our standards, they did good and they did well.

Self-awareness is one thing, self-flagellation another, and my opinion is that we in the UCC too often lean toward the latter, which does nobody any good. It's kind of an extension of white guilt, which also does nobody any good.

Here is a letter written last week by Rajan Kadir-gamar Principal Emeritus of Jaffna College, which was started in Sri Lanka by ABCFM missionaries in 1826.

“Wednesday, 2 August 2006

It is but right that the Haystack bicentenary should be celebrated with highest devotion and regard. We in Jaffna have the unique privilege of having the only one in that group of five, Rev. Dr. James Richards, arriving Jaffna in 1816. He lies buried at Tellipallai, Jaffna, Sri Lanka which came under heavy fire in the Tamil civil war, but the graveyard remains intact...When the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India, the successor to the American Ceylon Mission, celebrated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the ABCFM, this venue in Tellipallai was the centre of our celebrations. It is good to know that there are efforts to celebrate this event. Today, the descendants of the ABCFM spread around the world are involved in gathering Christian communities into churches in almost every major city in the world. There is no doubt that the faith of the Haystack Five with their resolve ‘We can if we will’ has borne fruit by the thousand-fold during these two hundred years. May God bless their memories, now in eternal life in the communion of saints.”<sup>1</sup>

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So, where does that leave us today? Where are the young people called to mission? Who are the folks called to ordained ministry? What are *you* called to do? Where are you willing to invest your time, your energy, your self?

Sharon and I want to help equip **you** for your ministry. So, help us by letting us hear from you about your passion for ministry, and let us know how we can help. God has given us the gifts, now we must use them. *We can...if we will.*

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> on the UCC/Disciples Global Ministries website