

“We Interrupt This Service....”
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

There was a time when these words broke through to our consciousness whatever we were doing: “We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin from CBS News.” That was the way Walter Cronkite did it, and he was the most trusted man in America. These days, with a 24 hour news cycle, we are more likely to see “Breaking News” on the screen that tells us there is a big story developing. We listen intently and take in the facts as they unfold. If it is really a minor incident or important only because of the celebrity of the individual involved, we become frustrated that regular programming is sacrificed for THAT? We interrupt this service today to give you a news flash that should not be news to any of us. We interrupt this service today to tell you the greatest news the world has ever heard, and that the reaction of the masses has been less than overwhelming. There is a gospel news flash that we should be taking very seriously that provides hope to a hurting world. There is a call to generous service that we support and cheer until we are asked to answer it and give of ourselves. Then we become the Moses of 2009 – a great call to do a great work, but we have many excellent excuses.

Paul, in our text today, is writing to a weak Corinthian Church that did not see its weaknesses. They thought they did everything well, so Paul is challenging them in their complacency. He tells them about the generosity of the really poor churches of Macedonia, hoping that they will be motivated to solve their problems in a generous spirit of fellowship and unity. He encourages them to take their place among the churches in serving one another and supporting the poor. They like what Paul has to say, having endorsed this very idea a year earlier. But they lacked action. They lacked the will to put their faith in action. Why?

News Flash 1: Maybe it was because they thought it was just too much. Yes, there are many things the church should be doing, but somebody else can do it better than I can. I will just let them do it. News Flash: Maybe you are the only one that can do it the way God wants it done! Did you ever notice how we put OUR standards on God’s work, trying to make the ministries of the Church suit us? “I can’t” did not work for Moses, and it should not work for us. If we are obedient to his call on our lives, we will be able to do it. God does not call the equipped, but he does equip the called. Many of us today believe that a call to service is vocational, long-term, and life altering. It might be, but it might be as simple as making a few extra phone calls each month or sending a note or email of encouragement. It may be the hardest thing you have ever done, or it may be something you could have been doing all along with ease and just did not notice the need or the possibility. God is a God of possibilities, and he never expects you to do everything alone.

An elderly woman had always wanted to travel abroad, so one day she went to the post office and applied for a passport. The clerk told her that she would have to take the loyalty oath first. "Raise your right hand, please," he said. The lady did as she was told. "Do you swear to defend the Constitution of the United States against all its enemies, foreign or domestic?" he asked. The woman hesitated and turned pale. She leaned toward the clerk and asked in a trembling voice, "Uhhh . . . all by myself?"

The glory of serving others in the name of Christ is that we do not have to do it alone. While there are things we can do alone, our greatest impact comes when we work together.

Do you ever get a sinking feeling when you watch the evening news? Another suicide bombing. Civil war in parts of Africa. Death squads in Brazil. Americans dying in Afghanistan. The growing drug trade in the U.S. What a conflict there is between the Eden God created and the world as we know it! We don't have to look farther than our own neighborhood to see the results of sin, self-centeredness, and destruction. Where do you start if you want to make a difference? There are so many needs, so much brokenness, and you are just one person. It's enough to overwhelm even the most dedicated among us.

But God made the church to answer that need. The body of Christ was created and set apart to do the work that Christ did in the world. To go where his feet went, to the lost and poor and hurting of the world. To teach as Christ's taught, about love for God and love for our fellow human. To see as Jesus' saw, finding beauty and redemption and grace in a prostitute, a leper, a tax collector. To touch as Jesus touched, with gentleness and love and healing power. God didn't call on a few Lone Rangers to save the world. Instead, God called together a group of humble, average folks to preach and teach and heal and restore and tear down and build up and redeem a broken creation. And the only way we are ever going to accomplish that task is to rely on God's Spirit and one another's talents to make that difference in the world.

News Flash 2: Secondly, the Church at Corinth thought they were already doing enough. We sometimes feel that way, too. After all, we come to church every week and Sunday School or other small group, too, most of the time. News Flash: This is NOT church. This is worship. This is the time we come together and offer adoration and praise to God, but this really is not service. It's worship. And it is but a small part of your life each week. If you spend one hour a week in worship, then that's .9 percent of your waking hours each week. If you spend two hours in worship and a small group each week, you are giving God 1.8 percent of your waking hours each week. And, again, that is not service. It is worship and study. What are you doing to serve God? How much of your time are you willing to dedicate to his service?

Simple math gets at our problem. If we give God just 10 percent of our time, and attend worship and a small group every week, we still have 9 ¼ hours to give before we have given God 10 percent of our time. Now that sounds a bit legalistic and Phariseean, but you get the point. Compared to the other activities of life, God often gets a comparatively small share when he has done so much for us.

I just stated that this is not church. Let me reinforce that. The church is not a place, a building, an address, or an event happening at an appointed time. The church is you and me doing whatever we do wherever we are every moment of the week. It's what we do when we are not here that influences those who are seeking and questioning whether God is the answer to the questions and difficulties in their lives.

News Flash 3: Why then should we serve generously? I'm sure the Corinthian Church in their complacency wondered about this, too. News Flash: God so loved the world that he GAVE first. That's not just an information piece, but a truth that should propel us to action. God hit the 'send' command in his divine program, and it seemingly malfunctioned. Jesus told us to meet the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in Matthew 25. He sent us into the world in Matthew 28:19 to share the good news that sin and even death can be overcome. We have no trouble finding God in the high and lofty

phrases of scripture and song. We covet those times of prayerful meditation and solitude, realizing how messy it is to delve into the circumstances of our world.

Some of those beautiful, lyrical words are found in the opening to John's account of the gospel: It begins with soaring phrases: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... " (John 1:1). If John had stopped after that first line, the Greek philosophers could have voiced their admiring approval. They, too, wanted to mount up with eagle's wings, to leave the earth behind, and to ascend into the celestial heights to be with God.

But John's opening does not end with the first line. The eagle suddenly dives toward the ground. Heaven crashes to the earth. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" John does not claim that the Word entered into flesh or abided in flesh but that the Word became flesh. In Jesus Christ, God entered creation, became flesh, and all of the darkness in the world cannot overcome the light of that saving act. God in human form entered into the suffering and imperfection of the human experience, and he calls us to do the same. He took on the messiness of the human condition, and as his body, we are called to the 'down and dirty' of the human condition as well.

Barbara Lundblad, Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary, tells of a phone call she received from a former student who was serving an inner city parish. Professor Lundblad asked her how their building renewal project was going. "Great!" said the student. "But we ran out of money before we could refurbish the sanctuary." Lundblad bristled a little at this. Naturally, she considers worship to be the first priority of the church. "But we had enough to remodel the basement where we have the homeless shelter so we could put in some new beds and get a better kitchen and clean up the place for our guests." They had just dedicated the basement by gathering in their old run down sanctuary to praise and pray and hear the word of God: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:35-36). Then they took the bread and the communion chalice and went down to the basement and broke the bread over the new beds and shared the cup in the new kitchen.

That night the beds were full and the sanctuary still needed work. And Christ was fed and welcomed and clothed and sheltered by his church. Said Lundblad, "May it always be so among us."

News Flash 4: What about us? Do you have a commitment to a ministry or ministries of the Church? News Flash: Paul told the Corinthian Church that even though what they were doing was good, it was not generous. The poor churches of Macedonia were serving generously, so Corinth which was much wealthier could also. We are consistently encouraged to be in worship and a small group for our own spiritual development, but I want to expand that this morning. You do need to worship. You do need to study. But you also need to serve generously. You need to be committed to at least one ongoing ministry of the church. God's grace is God's generosity towards us, and we who have experienced his grace should be motivated to translate that experience into service that will bring others closer to God.

This church formed a building committee in February 2001. I was on that committee. Much work has been done toward the formulation of building plans to accommodate growth. We have not built any buildings yet. Maybe that is God's plan. Our growth is not intended to be in brick and mortar just yet. Our growth should be in impacting the lives of

those around us in Jesus' name. Even if we never build a building, we must continue to build the church.

It's football season, and we all have our favorite teams. Sometimes things go really well, and sometimes they don't. But the team takes the field week after week in a season-long campaign for victory. When they are successful, is it because of the hours rigorous training? The pep talk from the coaching staff? The conversation in the huddle? What about proper equipment, financial support, and a thorough knowledge of the fundamentals of the game and the plays the team has mastered? Which is the most important? When we see a game, we see the coach pacing on the sidelines talking into his headset, but the only thing that resembles planning is the huddle on the field before each play. To state the obvious, the game is not won in the huddle. No matter how elaborate the play or how capable the players, two truths are apparent: (1) It is not just a once-a-week effort. The team has to work on it all week every week. (2) If they do not leave the huddle and execute the plays well, they will not win. The same is true of the church.

News Flash 5: I have news for you this morning: We should serve generously every week and every day, impacting our community in ways that make the local newspapers. God deserves radical generosity in faithfulness and service. In the Sand Point, Idaho United Methodist Church where my brother-in-law serves as pastor, they do not have an offering. They have a time of "Radical Generosity." We should be a people who eagerly anticipate the opportunities to serve, willingly placing our lives in the offering plates of the community every day. We need to face each new day with a determination to improve the physical and spiritual quality of life of those we encounter, and to do so with joy and thanksgiving for the opportunities we have to serve.

Three hundred plus of you come here every week. You worship and perhaps attend a small group, but do you serve? Of those of you who serve, how many ever do anything outside of the huddle? How many of you are so deeply involved in the business of the church that you have no time for the ministry of the church? Please don't misunderstand. I didn't say we should not be about the business of the church, but if that's all we are doing, we are like the football team that only huddles and then wonders why it can't win the game. The best talent, the best coaching, the best facilities – none of that matters unless you are willing to act on what you know.

So, we interrupt this service this morning to call you on what you are doing or not doing, and to give you an opportunity to serve with radical generosity. Each of you has an insert in your bulletin today that lists in general categories areas of service available to you through this congregation. You may be asked to serve in an administrative capacity, too, but these exist to support ministry, not replace ministry. Take a moment to find the area or areas that resonate with the call God is placing on your life. Don't focus on what you can't do but find an area that you can do or want to do. If you don't find your passion listed there, tell us about it, and let's explore starting a new ministry. God is calling you and me to serve him by serving others in new and marvelous ways, but like the chain with missing links, he cannot do it without you.

Take a couple of minutes and prayerfully consider an area or areas of service that you feel God tugging you toward. Mark your form, and bring it forward. Lay it on the altar as a solemn commitment to almighty God to serve him with gladness by helping the gospel message to come alive in the lives of the thousands in this community for whom Christ is not yet real.

Prayer