

“Tools of the Trade”

“God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of this Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

One of my favorite childhood Christmas presents was a Handy Andy tool kit that my parents gave me. It had child-sized tools that looked just like the tools my father used, and I was able to join him in his workshop to assist him in his projects. Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that I didn’t have the skills required to use any tools – children’s or adult’s – in any useful fashion; but I will always remember how thrilled I was that Christmas that my parents had given me a set of tools that I could use.

That Handy Andy tool set may have proved to have been fairly useless for me, but there were many other tools that my parents gave me that have proven quite beneficial to me throughout my life. There were the tools I learned in school – tools of reading, writing, logic, critical thinking, and discernment – that I continue to use today. There were the tools of showing respect for others, being responsible, being a good citizen in the community – tools that have given me the means of living a life of integrity in both my professional and personal life. But the greatest tools – the greatest gift – that my parents gave me was the gift of faith. They not only brought me to be baptized on April 28, 1957 in my home congregation in North Plainfield, New Jersey; they also took seriously their responsibility to bring me to the services of God’s house, teach me the basics of the Christian faith, place into my hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for my instruction in the Christian faith. It is through the blessing of these tools of faith that I have been able to live as a Christian and serve others in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The blessings of the faith that was given to me through the faithfulness of my parents, teachers, pastors, and role models has blessed me with the “tools of the trade” that I continue to use to make a difference for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Paul sits down to write his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, he is aware that they have been entrusted with many tools of faith that they can use to share the good news of Jesus Christ in their community. While these tools were also entrusted to them by their mentors in faith, Paul emphasizes that the true source of these tools with which they have been gifted is from God, through the *“grace that has been given you in Christ Jesus”* (1:4). The gifts that can become the tools of their ministry are not of human origin, but are gifts of the Holy Spirit that have been passed on through human vessels such as Paul, members of the community of faith who he will describe in his second letter as *“clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”* (2 Corinthians 4:7). It is God who has placed the tools of the Spirit into the hands of God’s people; the question is whether these people will recognize the source of these tools and use them for their intended purpose.

All of Paul’s undisputed letters begin with the formula that begins our Second Lesson: *“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (1:3). “Grace and peace be unto you” was a typical greeting in ancient Greek culture; for Paul, the origin of these blessings is not from the one who speaks the words but from God through Jesus Christ. God’s grace not only makes possible the beginning of faith but also sustains believers throughout their lives; *“grace is the indispensable ground of the life of faith from its beginning to its end.”* (J. Paul Sampley). Likewise, peace describes the believers’ new relation to God:

- “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” – Romans 5:1-2.

In all but one of his letters (the letter to the Galatians, in which Paul is so upset over what is happening among the churches in Galatia that he moves directly from the greeting to the body of the letter), Paul grounds his communication with the Corinthians Christians in thanksgiving to God:

- “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Jesus Christ, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” – 1:4-7.

This thanksgiving in 1 Corinthians lays out the scope of the Christian life, from the inception of God’s grace given in Christ to the “day of our Lord,” to the “end” when the Lord will be revealed, and within that framework celebrate the way the Corinthians have been enriched and supplied with *charismata*, “spiritual gifts.” Paul will describe both the varieties of these spiritual gifts and their intended purpose later in the letter:

- “Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discerning of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” – 12:4-11.

From their having been called and confirmed in the faith and entrusted with these spiritual gifts, Paul looks forward to the goal toward which God’s grace is moving them: *“the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1:7). What God has begun, God will surely bring to completion, as Paul assures the Philippians: *“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6). The guarantee is grounded God’s faithfulness, the confidence that is at the heart of Scripture that God’s promises are always fulfilled and that therefore God’s people can continue to live in trust and hope:

- “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments...” – Deuteronomy 7:9.
- “I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.” – Psalm 89: 1-2.
- “Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the slave of rulers, ‘Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.’” – Isaiah 49:7.

Paul’s thanksgiving reminds the Corinthians *“of who richly they have been graced by God and of how God is faithful to carry through on what has been promised.”* (Sampley).

The confidence that Christians share in God’s faithfulness is expressed in their confession that Jesus Christ is *Lord* (*Kyrios*). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *Kyrios* is used to translate YHWH, the name God reveals to Moses on Mount Sinai (*“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’”* – Exodus 3:14). Its usage in the New Testament may be understood to mean that Jesus stands as Lord to the Christian Church in the relationship in which the LORD stood for Israel. In New Testament times, *Kyrios* was also a title for Caesar; its assignment to Jesus has special meaning for the life of the church in the world: *“To have Jesus as Lord*

means to obey him above all worldly authorities." (William Orr and James Walther, *Anchor Bible*). The Christian confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord" was often seen as being an act of treason in the Roman Empire, in which Caesar was considered the only true "Lord." Knowing that this confession will result in oppression and persecution for many of the faithful, Paul assures them that God will *"strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1:8). Christians are justified by the free grace of God and look forward to that day when *"at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Philippians 2:10-11).

- "The Corinthians faced extremely rigorous life conditions: most of them were poor, some were slaves, all had been victimized by the brutality of the evil society of the city; yet the Christian good news had given them a new vision and a new outlook toward the future." – Orr and Walther.

Paul's thanksgiving is rooted in his confidence in God's faithfulness and that God has endowed the believers in Corinth with all of the tools that are necessary for them to accomplish God's Will. But while Paul is confident in God's faithfulness, he does not have the same confidence in the faithfulness of the Corinthian Christians. While the Corinthian believers do not lack spiritual gifts, they do not seem to know how to employ them in service for the community. Instead, they have used gifts that are clearly from God to create "status-oriented cliques" based on what in the first place was simply a gift to them:

- "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might become kings in you!" – 4:7-8.

If we look closely at Paul's thanksgiving at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, we will notice that it is restricted to his delight that the people of the church have been made rich in all spiritual gifts; he does not mention their faith, love, or righteousness. They are *"rich in all speech"* and therefore well-equipped to proclaim the good news through *"the testimony of Christ,"* which is both the revelation that has occurred in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as well as the revelation still to come *"on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."* But even though they have all of the tools needed to accomplish God's Will for God's Church, they have not been faithful stewards of these spiritual gifts that have been entrusted to them, a subject that Paul needs to address in what will be a difficult series of correspondence with the Corinthians.

- "Paul is writing to people who have already engaged in quarrels, nourished scandalous conduct, doubted some of the basic elements of the gospel, questioned the authority of the apostle, and threatened to go off into extravagant fanaticism. On occasion they have driven Paul to tears, yet here he states unconditionally that they will be blameless in the final evaluation. He is echoing the simple announcement of the gospel that those who believe in God's forgiveness will have nothing against them at the end." – Orr and Walther.

As we begin a new church year on this first Sunday in Advent, we gather as a people whose faith is rooted in our confession that *Jesus Christ is Lord*, that the one whose coming we celebrate is *"true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [and he] is my Lord."* (*Small Catechism*). Our confession that Jesus Christ is Lord means that we reject all other gods and all who demand ultimate allegiance; our baptismal faith that is rooted in the Christian confession of faith means that we renounce *"the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... [and] the ways of sin that draw you from God."* (ELW Holy Baptism). We believe that in Baptism we have been endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit: *"the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever."*

As we welcomed the newly baptized into the community of faith, we also invite this new child of God to *"join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."* We live together as a community of faith in which *"the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel"* (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). We give thanks for all of the blessings that God has bestowed upon us, and share Paul's confidence that God has entrusted to us the same gifts that were given to the Corinthians *"so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift."* God has given us all of the tools necessary for us to accomplish God's Will for this congregation, which is *"to celebrate God's presence among us and reflect God's love. Together, we are all ministers in our church, community, and the world."*

We have no doubt in God's faithfulness and in the abundance of blessings and spiritual gifts that God has bestowed upon us. The question for us is the same question that Paul poses to the Corinthians: are we being faithful stewards of these gifts? Are we using the tools of ministry for the purpose that God intends, *"for building up the body of Christ"*; or are we either neglecting them – allowing them to gather dust on the shelves – or misusing them for our own selfish purposes? Are we employed the abundance of spiritual gifts we have been given *"to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Peter 2:9); or are we using gifts meant to be used in service to others to create *"status-oriented cliques"* based on what was in the first place a gift entrusted to us *"to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12). How faithfully are we using the tools that our Lord has entrusted to us as his church here in this place at this time?

The manner in which we live our lives as faithful stewards of the tools of ministry, of the spiritual gifts that God has entrusted to us, is a means through which we confess our Christian faith in action in the same manner in which we confess our faith in the words of the historic creeds:

- *"Stewardship must be understood first as descriptive of the being – the very life – of God's people. Deeds of stewardship arise out of the being of the steward ... Real and effective deeds of stewardship will occur only when persons hear that gospel and are moved by that Spirit that changes their being, lifting them from the sloth of irresponsibility or judging their pride of mastery and giving them a new being – the being of stewards."* – Douglas John Hall, *The Steward*.

Our being faithful stewards of the tools and gifts that God has entrusted to us begins when we affirm the baptismal promises that our parents made when we were reborn children of God, in which we promise to be faithful in using what God has given to us for the purposes that will accomplish God's Will: *"to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."* (ELW Affirmation of Baptism).

While I may not have had the skills to use my Handy Andy tool kit in the manner in which its manufacturer and my parents had intended, I did learn some valuable lessons in respecting these tools, caring for them, not using them for purposes that would do harm to anyone or anything, and pass them on so that others might use them. May all of us who have been entrusted with spiritual gifts – the tools of ministry – be faithful in caring for what God has entrusted to us, so that through these tools of faith all may know that *Jesus Christ is Lord*. Amen.