

Fourth Sunday of Lent
John 12:20-33 (Lent 5 B text)
March 22, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

A couple of months ago, some of you may remember that I asked the congregation to lift up names of people who had been in ministry in special ways during the past year. Many of you responded, and the resulting list of people was printed in the most recent edition of the newsletter. (By the way, if you don't receive the newsletter but would like to, please drop a note in the offering plate, or there are always extra copies near the sanctuary doors.) The purpose of this was to come up with one name to send along to the Austin District as an exemplary lay person in ministry for the past year. It wasn't supposed to be a lifetime achievement award, nor was it a popularity contest, but even so that kind of thing is very hard. I will say that I take issue with any system that asks us to lift up just one person, and I passed that sentiment along to the powers that be at the district. Other churches have said the same thing, and whatever they do next year will probably look different.

But for this year, we did have all these wonderful names brought forth, and I, in consultation with the Nominations and Leadership Committee, did pick one. I want to start by reminding you of the people you named, then to tell you a little about the one we named for special recognition, and finally to talk about how our gospel lesson speaks to the kind of service represented by these people. If I call your name and you're here today, please stand.

*Kelly Barclay
Janette Barlow
Darlene Birgel
Steve Birgel
Hit Bishop
Pat Bishop
Kay Bowman
Amy Brinkley
Dinah Burgin
Melanie Cagle
Lee Cox*

*Debbie Detmer
Emil Dzuik
Steve Gartside
Kay Halm
Bev Hartsock
Judy Heaton
Carol Howie
Mary Gail Jacobson
John Kuykendall
Doug Martin
Jack Massengale*

*Dan McCuistion
Vicki McCuistion
Jamie McGinnis-Willits
Barb Rutherford
JJ Schwetzmenn
Jana Simpson
Fran Tise
Rob Watson
Nelda Williams*

These brothers and sisters represent all sorts of ministries in this church—there are people who keep us running administratively and physically, through our facilities; others who care for our children or feed our stomachs; some who sing or pray or teach; some who lead and organize others; some who visit the sick and help the poor; some who share their wisdom; and others who do whatever it is that needs doing.

The name we sent in to the district this year was that of Kay Bowman. Kay and John have been at this church about as long as I have, and even despite some of John's more unfortunate characteristics, they have given themselves over to this family of faith. Kay serves and has served in many official capacities—through children's ministry and as a trustee, as the current chair of the Worship Committee. She grew up in the church—she said her parents ran a flower shop, so she spent her childhood in the sanctuary, making it beautiful for worship, which explains a lot. Kay has done just about every job there is to do in the church, and she's a former school administrator as well, so she said she's used to being in charge of things. But several years ago she was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, and that changed things. What is remarkable to me and to many of us is that Kay lives with a condition that would cause many to stay

home, stay put. But what Kay has done instead is to just shift the ways she serves. She says she doesn't do what she can't do; she does what she can, but that includes a whole lot of things that we would all excuse her from doing. From my perspective, Kay's service to Christ through the life of this church is a gift she gives that is precious, and it's made of sacrifice. The fact that her sacrifice also feeds her and fills her up makes it no less sacrificial.

And here's where we intersect with the gospel lesson: Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love [or hold tightly to] their life lose it, and those who hate [or let go of] their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor" (12:24-26). The life of the Christian person finds its fulfillment in giving itself away. There are a lot of things we can do in the church that make us feel good but don't ask much of us. Those things have value. But when you lay down your life as a grain in the soil, when you let your outer covering fall away, you open up that God-seed inside of you, giving God access to the potential that God placed there, the shape of which even you cannot know, the leaf and fruit of which we will only know once they have sprouted and bloomed.

This is who the church is called to be—individuals who give themselves away like this, and a body that does the same thing.

I want to share with you a reflection from a fellow member here:

"...the way in which we are connected in Christ (as Christians) or in God (as all of God's children) is partially reflected in how I experience my own connection with K., WUMC's nominee this year. It's a wonderful thing to be somehow a part of this woman whose generous gifts of self and beautiful tangible gifts as well are all over the place! This week when I dropped by the church, there she was with Abby Funderburk, working in the church garden--raking, clearing, making the garden more beautiful. And, when another passerby asked, "Are you looking after Abby?" K. replied, "Oh no, she's helping me." A short time later she was there by the sink, washing (Abby's) two red shoes that had gotten muddy. On a regular basis she fills laundry baskets and decorates them for children at the Hays-Caldwell Women's Center...

"And, beyond the many kindnesses and gifts K. shares is the fact that because she is a part of us, we, too, take part in those kindnesses and gifts. Just as we share in each other's sorrows and griefs, so we share in their gifts and graces. When dear Lydia bought a gift to give to the Dohertys on behalf of the Emmaus community that they have served, she said, "It's from all of us." Now, I hadn't even realized it was time for the Dohertys to leave their posts...much less thought about thanking them. But, I knew what Lydia meant when she said "It's from all of us..." because in some deep way...it was...not only because Lydia generously meant it to be so, but also because Lydia being a part of us made it so...

"Laura, this is one of those times when I get a glimpse into a deeper understanding of the phrase "we are all connected". So, perhaps that is a part of what we celebrate as we celebrate K...that she brings to us such treasures and offers them

for all of us to share... I do know that Jamie is out there dealing with difficult Barnabas clients not only for all of us, but with all of us as well...that Naida is making those amazing banners not only for our church, but with our church...that our choir not only sings for us, but with us all...and so it goes on and on... I wish I could find the words to say how deeply and mysteriously I feel this kind of connection where giving and receiving--of joys, pains, struggles, talents--are so closely bound...because as I think about "our" K. that is why she is "ours"...and we are hers...and why we send her name to be honored."

The life of ministry as disciples of Christ is one of sacrifice and change and letting go. But ministry is also where we find our true selves, where we can watch God do with us what we could never accomplish on our own. Ministry is where we find life that's full of God's life, where our roots get all entwined with each other's, and where the fruit of our service feeds the world. Christ asks everything of us, all of it, but he promises even more in return.

Hear this story of a church that has given itself away:

"The bad news kept coming—every time we turned on the TV, we heard about the economy," said Pastor Scott Johnson as he described the climate in which Union United Methodist Church of Conway, South Carolina embarked on a campaign to raise funds for their church's desperately needed repairs.

Still, faced with critical building needs of their own, the people of Union UMC felt God challenging them to do something different; something that looked beyond themselves into the needs of others. This was the seed for what would become "Union with the Congo".

Union with the Congo was this small church's initiative to raise not only capital funds for their building repairs but also an equal amount to construct wells and latrines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in partnership with the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR).

In the midst of hard financial times, they knew it would take a miracle, and a miracle is just what they got. This small town church of approximately 150 raised \$14,200 for Union with the Congo—sufficient funds for building repairs and to dig one well and latrine in the Kamina area of Congo where people lack access to both. In 2009, they are doubling their goal.

Access to clean water is just one of the ways that UMCOR, with the help of partnerships like Union UMC, is meeting dire needs of poverty stricken areas of the world. You, too, can support the work of UMCOR by contributing to the "One Great Hour of Sharing" offering. Times are tough but if we dare think beyond ourselves, we will be surprised at what God can do!