

“Finishing the Job– Being the Church” based on 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Delivered on June 27, 2021, at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Over the last few weeks, I've been putting together some notes to share with Session. In these notes, which I will deliver in the next couple of weeks, I've included my impressions of where the church was when I got here, and how you have grown as a congregation over these past three years. Lastly, I will include my hopes for you in the years ahead, to finish the work that you, the people of this church, have started.

I believe that you, as a church, have an incredible future ahead of you. Though I believe God is calling me to my new call down in North Carolina, I am sad that I will not be here to see you continue to grow into your calling. I'll watch from afar, but that's not the same. The successes we have seen over these last few years are not mine. As I've stressed to you, this church is not the building and it is not the pastor. The church is you, the people God has called to reveal God's love, and establish the Kingdom of God in this community. I believe you are a church with a calling to be a place where all people can belong and know God's love for them, empowered with you to share that love.

I truly believe that I was called by God to join you in your ministry, to bring a particular set of skills, that centered on teaching and administration. And so, my focus has not been to make this church in my image, that would be unfortunate. Instead, it has been to help you to recognize the image of God in you and every person, starting with the good news of Jesus Christ, who being equal to God, who did not regard equality with God as something to exploit. But instead, humbled himself to share in our humanity, taking the form of a human in slavery, even to the point of death, death on a Roman cross.

Friends, even though the world put all the weight of sin and death upon him, Jesus was raised from the dead, and by his death we are made temples of the Spirit, both individually, and as a church, knowing that if this Spirit raised him, then this Holy Spirit in and among us, will raise us to new life also. This is both now in this life, by grace and mercy, and a calling in us, and also, in the life to come, the eternal new creation. This is what we testify to when we proclaim Christ and share God's love with those around us.

I have been amazed by the progress and growth I have seen in this church community. I have sought to empower you to be the church that God has called you to be, by recognizing this good news, letting it change you, and empowering you to embrace it. Your session members over these three years have embraced this, recognizing that the power of your church is not in its pastor, but in each and every member and friend living their faith, guided by the Holy Spirit to be the church.

In your response to the Good News proclaimed, I have been a witness to your growing faith, and to your sense of community also growing, especially, as ironic as it may seem, during this last year and a half. You see, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the livelihood of many churches, but rather than be a bunch of individuals going at it alone in you homes, I have

witnessed so many of you making phone calls to each other, sending cards of love, joy and encouragement to each other, and responding to the needs of others in this church. It really has been incredible to see. What started with some of you making masks and checking in during the height of quarantine, has resulted in new relationships, no longer only dependent, on Sunday mornings to connect.

This Sunday, we begin the third phase of our Re-Gathering plan, and even though we are still requiring people to wear masks, pre-registration is gone, the doors are open again, and all are welcome to gather in our building. But your session has decided not to give up the Online broadcasts, because it has been amazing to see so many of you on Facebook, where those who have struggled to get to church in the past are now able to join us, in community. Not just that, online is a place where talking in church through comments, is not only allowed, but encouraged.

I have friends in ministry who complain of posting their services online, and having no idea if people are actually watching, worried people have lost touch with one another. Yet, when I tell them of the hundred or so comments you make each service, and about the hundreds of reactions you click at different moments, they are amazed. They respond by saying that you, this church has figured out how to stay in community. Even when you are online, and that is you being the church. I hope this continues, and you stay connected, as one church, online and in person, always, ready to come together for new things, and walk in faith together.

You see, over the past few years, you have become a closer-knit community has been wonderful, but also over this past year, your Session has been working on new ideas for this church. These are ideas that not only seek to build your relationships with one another, but also, to forge new relationships in the community around our church. I love this idea to use our church facilities as a community hub, building on its use for AA and community meetings, to be more intentional, about understanding the needs of the community, and gathering church members to reach out, and meet these needs together.

This might be offering a knitting class, talks on home cyber security, help with finances, guidance on navigating the health care system, or even art or cooking classes. You all have so many skills and this church is in a community that needs you. By building relationships with people, they will see Christ in you, and perhaps see something different in you that is different than the rest of the world and draws them to you, and through you, draws them to the love of God. It's not about numbers or gaining new members, but about sharing God's love through your love.

There is a term for this that I will now steal from scholars James Dunn and Scot McKnight: That term is Christofornity or being shaped by Christ to reveal Christ to the world. To be formed by Christ is to know who Christ is and what Christ has done for us. This is so that we believers who know God's love for us are changed by it and then share it to reveal God's love to others, especially those who those who do not yet know the Lord, or maybe only know him in a cultural sense.

When we seek to live in this way, guided by the scriptures, we encounter Jesus, and we grow in our own faith, and in our own connections with one another. I have been so impressed with the eagerness of Session to do things like this. I have been impressed by the reactions of those who are not on Session, and the excitement I have seen in you to do things like this. These ideas and others, are why I know God has a plan, and that plan is for this church to have a vital role in the ministry of reconciliation that is so needed in both our community and the world.

In this passage from Second Corinthians, I see you in Paul's description of these churches, both the Macedonian churches, and his appeal to the Corinthian Church for money. This is why I love the lectionary so much for preaching, because every time, it seems to offer a passage from God's word that fits every situation.

Like the Macedonian Church you have suffered a great deal in these last few years. We have lost so many members, vital members, both to death, and to those who have moved away, to be closer to their families. Yet in their absence you have continued to give generously, and to step up to fill the void left by their departures. As Paul said of these churches, from the depth of poverty, not financial in your case, but losing these members is our poverty. And from this poverty you have overflowed with a wealth of generosity, in the work of those who have stepped in, and continued their work.

I have been overjoyed at those members who have begged eagerly to get involved, wanting the privilege of sharing in the work of God's people, as Paul said. These members didn't just do what I had hoped they would do, but gave of themselves, first to the Lord, and served God's will. I don't want to limit myself by naming names, but I will anyway, because I've seen this in Debbie Wong very clearly. I've seen it in Tina Harvey too, and Ann Wallace, Loretta Metz, and Betty Price, as well, and in Louise Speitel, and in many more.

I mention these because the Good News Express has been a beautiful new ministry. It is a new program for the Fellowship Committee that started with drive by visitations at the start of COVID and has grown into birthday and holiday cards, get well cards and still more visits and phone calls. It also was the impetus for running the Christmas Card program when we couldn't come into the church to use the mailboxes. I've seen it in the Barbara Hughes Memorial Give Back program through which Loretta Metz and the deacons brought meals, paid for by your generosity, to members for holidays. Now, Betty and Ann have led the soup drive, to have soup and bread for shut ins.

And of course, we are all thankful for Louise, who with her son Ken from Taiwan were able to schedule so many appointments for vaccinations, when they were hard to get, ensuring that so many of you have been protected from this deadly virus. They were doing this diligently from a very early time in the availability of vaccines to us. Friends, these are just a few examples, and I've omitted others, including the work of Dan, Don, Bob, Melvin and Ken and more, but they are all examples of Christofornity. In our suffering, you have recognized God's love in you, & shared that love with others.

But also, you are like the Corinthian Church that Paul is writing to, albeit in different ways. This is because you excel in many ways – your generous financial giving is amazing, your perseverance in times of struggle is inspirational. Your commitment to attending church services, even when online, is remarkable. It is something many other churches struggle with, and your faith is strong, and you are well loved.

While Paul writes of a financial pledge the Corinthian church made to the Jerusalem church, I want to now encourage you as he did to make good on your own pledge. No, not a financial one, for you have been faithful in this regard—keep that up. But the pledge I speak of is the one from the beginning of this sermon. Namely, that you finish the job you have been so eager to do, to build relationship with each other in these tough times and be a community hub to build new relationships, with the people who are your local neighbors, and need to encounter God's love in you.

To mimic Paul in verses 8 to 15, and I will steal his words and apply them to you: *'I'm not saying this as though I am issuing an order. It's a matter of putting your enthusiasm and your own love side by side and making sure you genuinely pass the test. For you know the grace of our Lord, King Jesus: he was rich, but because of you, he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*

'Let me give you my serious advice on this: you began to be keen on these ideas, and to start putting it into practice, over the last three years; it will now be greatly to your advantage to complete your performance of it. If you do so, your finishing the job of being the church, as far as you're able, will be on the same scale as your eagerness, the same scale as your wanting to do it.

'If the eagerness is there, you see, the deed is acceptable, according to what you have, plenty of talent and skills to share, plenty of time and treasure to invest, not according to what you don't have, but what you do. Use the gifts you already have. The point is not, after all, that some should get off lightly, and those already doing most of the work should suffer, but rather that there should be equality, everyone stepping up together for this work.

'At the present time each of you in your abundance can contribute to what is lacking, so that the new abundance can contribute to what is lacking in your community. That's what makes for equality (and Christofornity, going out to meet others, indeed, meeting others where they are and bearing with one another in love). For it is just as the Bible says: 'The one who had much had nothing to spare, and the one who had little didn't go short.'

The future of this church and every church for that matter, depends on its Christofornity. The future depends on your willingness to be like Christ both in your worship, and in your action in this world, proclaiming through word and deed the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be fueled by your study of God's word, knowing who Jesus is, as God in our flesh, and that he died for you, and rose for you, so that knowing this love can mold us all in his image, change us all, and lead us all to share that love as a testimony of him in the world around us. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (NTE) Let me tell you, my *dear family*, about the grace which God has given to the *Macedonian* churches. They have been sorely *tested* by suffering. But the abundance of grace which was given to them, and the *depths* of poverty they have endured, have overflowed in a *wealth* of *sincere generosity* on their *part*. I *bear* them *witness* that of their own *accord*, up to their *ability* and even beyond their ability, they begged us *eagerly* to let them have the *privilege* of *sharing* in the work of *service* for God's *people*. They didn't just do what we had hoped; they gave themselves, first to the Lord, and then to us as *God* willed it. This *put* us in a *position* where we could *encourage* Titus that he should *complete* this *work* of grace that he had begun among you. You have plenty of everything, after all – plenty of *faith*, and *speech*, and *knowledge*, and all kinds of eagerness, and plenty of love *coming* from us to you; so why not have *plenty* of this *grace* too? I'm not saying this as though I was issuing an *order*. It's a *matter* of putting their *enthusiasm* and your own *love* side by side, and *making* sure you genuinely *pass* the test. For you know the grace of our *Lord*, King Jesus: he was rich, but because of you he became *poor*, so that by his *poverty* you might become *rich*. Let me give you my serious *advice* on this: you began to be *keen* on this *idea*, and to *start* putting it into *practice*, a whole *year* ago; it will now be *greatly* to your *advantage* to complete your *performance* of it. If you do so, your finishing the *job* as far as you are able will be on the same scale as your eagerness in wanting to do it. If the eagerness is there, you see, the deed is acceptable, according to what you have, not according to what you don't have. The point is not, after all, that others should get off lightly and you be made to suffer, but rather that there should be equality. At the present time your *abundance* can contribute to their lack, so that their abundance can contribute to your lack. That's what makes for equality, just as the Bible says: 'The one who had much had nothing to spare, and the one who had little didn't go short.'