

## Season after Pentecost

July 29 & 30, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD  
Readings: Matthew 10:28-32; Ephesians 4:1-16

### “Grace-full Body Building”

*Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

There once was a devout young prince who ruled a mountain kingdom. Wishing to build a monument to God and provide a place of worship for the people, he had a unique chapel constructed on the hill overlooking the valley where his people dwelt.

The house of worship was a lovely piece of architecture. Its art glass windows reflected all the changing colors of day, from sunrise to evensong. All the appointments of the church were conducive to holy reverence, as befits a sanctuary for worship. There was one unusual feature in this church --- there was no chandeliers or wall lamps. Instead, there were scores of little niches in the walls intended to hold individual lanterns. The prince gave each household in the village a lantern.

Every Sunday evening the people who lived on the mountainside opposite the church saw something magical happen. The church bell would ring and worshipers would wend their way up the mountainside towards the church. They would enter the dark building and soon the church would light up brightly. The people each brought their lanterns, lit them and hung them around the church on the pegs set in the walls. Each little lamp contributed but a feeble radiance in its modest bracket, but when all the congregation were there, the chapel was brilliantly aglow with warmth and beauty. If only a few people came to church the light would be very dim. When even a few did not attend, the light was noticeably dimmer. The members depended on each other to be there and light their lantern. As the prince had hoped this reliance on each other and their lanterns, fostered a Christian fellowship that was rich in sympathy, appreciation and good will.<sup>1</sup>

“For each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift...for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” The Lord has given us each lanterns to build up God’s church — the body of Christ at this place. Each and every one of us — no matter the age, education, income, occupation or experiences — has been given gifts by the Lord, the prince of peace, for the mission of spreading the news and the ways of the gospel. It may be kindness, empathy for newcomers, organizing, sorting, cooking, writing, yard work, eloquence, patience, a heart for children, the elderly or those who are a bit different. I could go on to list many others. Let me be clear. No one here is without something to contribute to the Stone Soup of Haven. No one is done contributing. No one not yet old enough to contribute. God has brought us together with our lanterns of gifts to this place at this time to be and bring light into the darkness... to be Christ’s body builders. Without your gifts — no matter what they are — this Body of Christ called Haven Lutheran Church is diminished — it is missing something that is needed for us to be our best and bless others fully.

So today, you are challenged to accept and celebrate your God-given gifts. Think beyond finances or stellar talents, as important they may be. Today, think of abilities, aptitudes, and enthusiasms. Don’t overlook what may seem simple or ordinary to you because it is neither simple or ordinary to others of us. This week Dick and Don saw to yet another tube light that had gone out in the Gathering Room. Sue was trimming bushes and pulling weeds. Many don’t get close enough to the altar clothes to see their beauty. For several years now Clare and Linda have worked their needles to create lovely pieces that grace our chalices, bread and baptized children. Each time I open my portal communion kit at a hospital or home, I lay out a handkerchief with a stunning cross stitched by Sandy. Millie agreed to help us keep in touch with our college-bound youth. Five people and I interviewed three candidates for the

organist/choir director position. Kathy ironed altar clothes and stuffed bulletins. Danny covered the office on Tuesday so Mary could take a vacation day. Cliff sprayed weed killer. People brought in school supplies. Ten members have agreed to be Haven Connectors for one year, keeping in touch with ten members or families every other month. I still need three more.

Yesterday four people met to continue planning the Block Party and School Supply give away. We will need at least two dozen volunteers to be God's grace for a hundred children and their families offering the free, unearned, unconditional love expressed in a hotdog lunch, games, prizes, crafts, treats and school supplies. That is just some of the bodybuilding going on here at Haven. Where are your gifts needed? Don't know? Let me take you out for coffee or visit you at home — we can talk and pray about the wonderful gifts you have to offer our Lord's work here at Haven.

“Who you are is a gift. But so is where you are and what is going on around you and the relationships that you have with others.”<sup>2</sup> These are gifts of opportunity. There are certainly people around who could do a better job of delivering a sermon than me but they are not here. So I offer what the Holy Spirit has given to me in hopes it will bless you. These chances to exercise God's grace-filled Body can come up anytime, anywhere.

Last Sunday I went to Staples to get a load of school supplies that were on sale. I had a good cart full when I came to the checkout counter. She looked at my collar and me for a minute. “Pastor, if you bought a backpack, you could get 25% off all of this.” “Really? Even if it is already on sale.” Yep.” Where are the back packs?”

I selected a backpack and came back to the counter. As I was unloading the cart, someone yelled, “Hi, Pastor!” It was a young man who went to Christ Lutheran Church. I worked with him and his mother on a couple Lutheran Coalition projects. We chatted as my purchase was being rung up. His mother finished her purchase at another register and told me what a

good idea it was to have a school supply giveaway. "People don't understand how expensive it can be." She then told her son to come on. "I'm going to help pastor get this in her car." "Oh, okay, she said." I have to admit that until that moment I had forgotten that I would not be able to lift the boxes of notebooks and supplies into my car since I'm still not lifting much weight with my right arm. Now I had help I hadn't even realized I needed. When we were done loading the car, he took back the cart and his mother gave me a check for \$50 to buy more school supplies. That store clerk and the folks from Christ Lutheran had the gift of opportunity given to them. They could do something to help children and me and they did. Sometimes the gift God gives us is to be in the right place at the right time to provide something that is needed — an encouraging word, opening a door, sharing your garden surplus with a neighbor. It's not a matter of what someone else may do better, quicker or nicer. You are the one there not someone else. You are the body of Christ in action. You are God's gift.

Our gifts are as diverse as our contributions. Everyone brings something to the holy party and place we call church. God hasn't forgotten to give anyone gifts. We are each ingredients to a beautiful cake that can delight and feed many. If an ingredient is missing, the cake is just not all it could be... some might miss out getting a taste of God's grace. I recently saw a tag line on someone's e-mail that said, "If life gives you scraps, make a quilt." I know it was probably saying something similar to, "If life gives you lemons, then make lemonade." But I thought something very different ---- isn't the church like a collection of diverse and different scraps of cloth that have found their way here. Some are worn, some newer, some flashy, some more subdued, some large, some small. The scraps may not look like much until the Divine Quilter brings them together to create a fascinating pattern and a blanket capable of providing warmth, shelter from the rain or sun, a place to sleep, a way to bundle meager possessions when its necessary to flee danger and a sign of hope. Remove one of the scraps in the quilt and you make a hole. You

weaken it and diminish its ability to do all those things for which it was created. That is the church. That is us. Called together by God in all our quirks, beauty, varying life experiences, and resources to be the Body of Christ at this time in this place so that the world may know the love of God in and through us. Together. Each being the gift he or she is for the building up of the body of Christ. Everyone equipped. Everyone needed to keep the body building itself up “to make the world God loves a better place.”<sup>3</sup>

Remember that church built by the prince for the love of God and the people? After the worship service, the villagers would leave, taking their lanterns home. To those who watched from a distance, it was as if a stream of light poured out of the church and over the mountainside. Hold your lanterns high. Light up this mission outpost with your gifts. God will keep your lanterns fueled. And imagine what the Lord can do when we let God’s light and grace pour out of Haven and spill over our neighbors. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 7/28/17

## ENDNOTES

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- 1.. A melding of two versions of the story: Father Tommy Lane, “Church on a Hill-Top” (“I found this story in the liturgy for the 5th Sunday of Year A (1999) by Rev RJ Fairchild”) as posted on [http://www.frtommylane.com/stories/light/city\\_hilltop.htm](http://www.frtommylane.com/stories/light/city_hilltop.htm) AND H.M. Lippett, “Church of the Lighted Lanterns” as posted on <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1948/04/church-of-the-lighted-lanterns>
  - 2.. Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade, “Gifts” July 27, 1997 as posted on [day1.org/837-gifts](http://day1.org/837-gifts)
  3. Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade, “Gifts” July 27, 1997 as posted on [day1.org/837-gifts](http://day1.org/837-gifts)