

MAKE YOUR LIFE SING

October 23, 2011, at 8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

by Leah Anderson, Lay Leader

Texas Annual Conference

for Laity Sunday



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Acts 10:23b-38 (NIV); 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 (MSG); and John 1:40-42 (MSG)

Acts 10:23b-38 (NIV)

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.²⁴The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.²⁵As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.²⁶But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

²⁷While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.²⁸He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me³¹and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.³²Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’³³So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

³⁴Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.³⁷You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached –³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 (MSG)

God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit.
God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit.
God’s various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all.

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

wise counsel

clear understanding

simple trust

healing the sick

miraculous acts

proclamation

distinguishing between spirits

tongues

interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

John 1:40-42 (MSG)

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John's witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, "We've found the Messiah" (that is, "Christ"). He immediately led him to Jesus.

Jesus took one look up and said, "You're John's son, Simon? From now on your name is Cephas" (or Peter, which means "Rock").

Please bow your heads with me.

We come to you this morning, God, rejoicing in this day, which you made and shared with us. We are filled with gratitude for the opportunity to worship you, together. As I speak these words from my heart, Lord, I pray that all those who hear them will find you in them. Amen.

When I hear Gospel music sung well, I feel like God is in the room, lifting spirits, infusing everyone with the Holy Spirit. Not too long ago, I had the opportunity to hear the Covenant Glen Gospel Choir sing during a worship service. Before

the last note of the musical offering was sung, every person in the room was on their feet, clapping their hands, swaying back and forth, feeling the spirit of God surrounding and within us. When I tell you that this choir sings Gospel music the way that God intended it to be sung, I think that may be an understatement. That music, those singers, infused the sanctuary with a life and light that reverberated throughout the rest of the service.

The opening hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, was a complete contrast, much more like what we've experienced this morning; yet, it too, spoke to my soul. For me, the feeling of "worship" is not complete unless I can raise my voice and sing. My spiritual flame is lit when I join in song with the voices of other believers. I need to have at least one hymn that I really know, so that I can sing, as John Wesley said, if not well, then at least loud.

The next morning while I was walking my dogs, listening to National Public Radio on my headphones, I heard a story about a gospel singer named Twinkie Clark. As soon as I heard her name, I wanted to know more — for instance is that a nickname, and if so, how did she get it? They never told me that, but they played clips of her singing and playing the organ. My feet started moving to the rhythm of the music. My head picked up, and I felt my spirits rise. Twinkie's sister said that as children their music teacher told them to make their instruments sing. As I listened to Twinkie play the organ, I agreed.

Not all of us are blessed with musical talent as one of our gifts. One of my most vivid childhood memories is walking to my piano teacher's house after school, dragging my feet, grieving the loss of a perfectly good sunny afternoon when I would be stuck indoors, suffering through the misery of knowing that I would never be as good a piano player as my older brother was. It was a fact. He had that gift, and I did not. Fortunately my teacher recognized that and after a couple of agonizing years, she convinced my parents that my talents lay elsewhere. God bless her!

My feet itched to be pedaling my bicycle, not the piano. I knew every shortcut through our neighborhood on foot and on my bike, but I couldn't memorize the simplest of melodies. I was always the first girl picked, and sometimes the first per-

son, when we chose teams for kickball! As I got older, my feet were happiest with a soccer ball – something neither of my brothers ever mastered! I could dribble the ball with my feet around the other players on the field, pass it to team mates, and put it in the net in such a way that I could almost hear that ball sing!

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, in the words of the Message, Paul tells us that God's various gifts are handed out everywhere, but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere, but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere, but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is. Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful.

It sounds to me like Paul could be describing an orchestra! Any one instrument alone might sound good, but what a difference when they all play together the music written by a talented composer. And of course, one of the keys to an orchestra playing well together is the direction of the conductor.

Like a musician, each of you has a gift – probably more than one. It might not be musical, and it might not be the same throughout your life. But regardless of what your gift is, I am entirely convinced that when we utilize our gifts from God, when we each play our instrument in God's orchestra, we will make our lives sing!

You may know that the United Methodist Church has been steadily losing membership since the 1960's. This is true about most mainline Protestant denominations, but I have spent the past few years immersed in trying to understand why that is the case and what we can do in the United Methodist Church to reverse that trend. I don't have specific data to support this, but my personal belief is that one of the major reasons for the decline is that we, the laity, have turned the vast majority of the ministry, mission, and **especially evangelism** of our church over to the clergy. We have, in essence, treated our pastors as if doing church was their job, not ours.

In our reading from Acts this morning we are told that, "As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. 'Stand up,' he said, 'I am only a man myself.'"

Peter, one of the twelve Apostles, the one whom Jesus called the rock, the one who was given the responsibility to be the builder of the church, acknowledges that he is only a man himself. He didn't try to make himself look better than Cornelius, a mere centurion. No, right there at Cornelius' house, Peter tells us, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message of God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached — how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

Clearly you do know the message of good news that God sent to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or you are a seeker, looking for confirmation that Christ is the truth, the life, and the way, or you would not be here today.

But what do you think would have happened to that message if Jesus' disciples didn't carry it on after Jesus was taken up into heaven?

What would have happened if Peter refused to go to Cornelius' house or if Cornelius' friends and relatives who received the Holy Spirit and were baptized at his house that day kept that good news to themselves?

What if they just relied on Peter, Paul, and the small group of Jesus' followers to spread the good news?

I think what would have happened might be illustrated by what we have seen happen in the United Methodist church in the past few decades. While Peter, Paul, Silas, and Stephen were alive to spread the Gospel, the church grew. While Barnabas and Timothy traveled the region sharing their stories and faith, new converts were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. While Dorcas, Mary, Martha, and Thomas welcomed people into their homes, shared a meal along with Christ's redeeming love, the number of faithful followers of Jesus Christ expanded.

But friends, when that generation, when those early Christians who witnessed the love of Christ first hand died, the infant church would have died with them – if not for the faithfulness of people like those present at Cornelius' house. The church, as we know it, would never have come into being.

Looking at how the early church grew makes me wonder if we, the laity, have looked too long to our clergy friends to be the Peters of our church. Have we given our pastors not only respect but saddled them with a responsibility, even a burden, they cannot possibly carry on their own? Which leads me to the thought that it is now time for all of us, lay people and clergy together, to be the church in a different way. Think with me, if you will, what it might look like if we each take a new look at the gifts we have been given. What if each of us takes our gifts down from the shelf, dusts them off, and consciously look for ways to use them – today and every day – here in our church, but more importantly outside the church in the world? How would that feel? Maybe it would give our clergy the opportunity to become the conductors rather than the whole orchestra.

It wasn't too long ago when the Pew Charitable Trust published results of a survey about church membership and attendance. I don't have specific numbers, but what the survey found was that the majority of us who are in churches today went for the first time because we were invited by someone else – one of our neighbors or coworkers, one of our friends or acquaintances. That result did not surprise me. But what I did find surprising is that the survey showed that the vast majority of us, two-thirds of us attending church today, have never invited anyone else to come to church with us!

That invitation is part of my faith story. I was invited by a friend to go to church with him while I was in college. All these years later I'm still going to church. And, although I don't do it as often as I could, I do make an effort to invite others to go with me. In fact, I invited someone to come here, with us, this morning. We know a young woman who is in graduate school at the University of Houston. She couldn't come today, but when I told her how close you are and what great young adult groups you have here, she said she'd look into coming in the future.

There must be something real to this inviting business because it's been part of Christianity from the very beginning. Right after John the Baptist tells his followers to expect the son of God, in John 1:40-42 we are told that Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John (the Baptist) had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

Peter, who became one of the most outspoken Christians, might never have come to Christ at all, without the invitation of his brother, Andrew.

So what does this have to do with us, United Methodist Christians in the year 2011 in Texas?

Well, it seems pretty clear to me that we, the lay people who sit in the pews each Sunday morning, need to stand up and take over the church!

No, I don't mean that we should throw out our clergy or storm the pulpit — although it was very generous of Jim to share his pulpit with me this morning. But when you go home today, I hope and pray that you will contemplate your faith and figure out ways to share it outside of these walls. Today, as we celebrate Laity Sunday, my first challenge is for all of you lay people!

Who are you going to ask to come with you next Sunday or to your Sunday School class?

Where will you get the courage to dig deep inside yourself so that you can witness to those who do not yet know the love and grace of having Jesus Christ?

Who is it that is just waiting for an invitation?

And for my clergy friends who are here this morning, my challenge for you is this: What will you do to help us, the laity, find the right words to share our faith with those who are not yet here? How will you challenge us, frequently, to live our faith in our daily lives so that even without words, we reflect God's love? How will you equip us to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

Remember Peter's words commanding "us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Friends, it is time for us all to become prophets and testify about him. It is time for us all to share that good news. The time has come for us to invite and to talk about what it means to have Christ in our lives. We must look for the people from every nation and neighborhood – people who are like us and those who are not. And if we do this, if we share the song of God the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in our lives, then I believe we will make our lives sing.

Amen