

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
28 June 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Together, We Serve: Led by Deacons (Servant Leaders)”

Second sermon in *Part III: Together, We Serve*
of the summer series: *Together, We are Community*

Philippians 1:1-6

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Since we voted in our new leadership structure here at Calvary on Pentecost Sunday, Siri and the spell check device on my i-phone and computer have been having a hey day. Let me just say that re-teaching and re-training Siri and AI is no joke! You see, many of you know that Damon and I have a golden retriever named Deacon. And so for nine years, the word Deacon (capital D singular) has only referred to our dog, but now we have deacons (little d plural). So now my technology assistants are so confused, I text Damon, “Did you feed Deacon?” and it auto-corrects to “Did you feed the deacons?” And he’s like, “What are you talking about? We hosted that deacon social thing last weekend...are we doing it again?!” Lord have mercy. I never thought the hardest thing about having a deacon body at Calvary would be Siri and auto-correct! But perhaps it’s fitting that AI confuses deacons with

an “always by your side, ready to retrieve, kind, compassionate, patient puppy,” right?

You see, like Siri and AI, I know that everyone has different understandings and contexts for what the word deacon means or maybe NO context for it. So today is about exploring this word in Calvary’s context.

Deacons are first and fore most servants. To serve, rather than be self-serving, stands out in our world, does it not? This is what makes servants automatically leaders in my mind. People we want to follow.

And servant leadership is a call we are **all** invited to embrace and endorse, even when life is hard, *especially* when life is hard. We don’t wait until the time is right or we have the time to serve. We serve now, because there is work to be done and that work can only be done through

us! You and me; God needs us. I hate to sound the alarm bells here but we do have an urgent need for servant leadership in our world, do we not?

So to be a servant is urgent work and joyful work! Joyful, you say? Yes, joyful! It's the stuff of joy because it's the stuff of Jesus. Jesus, the One who leads us to life abundant, in large part by serving others and being *in community* with others.

So let's look today at the Apostle Paul. He's just full of joy in the letter to the Philippians. It's amazing. Like the toddler who just picked up the coolest, most perfect rock on the playground and runs around showing everyone their prized possession, "isn't this the coolest rock ever?!"—Paul's enthusiasm and joy in this letter effortlessly oozes off the page. And it's definitely not in proportion to his personal circumstances. Because those are rough folks. He's in prison, he has competitors out to get him, he's been on the road traveling for 20 years, living out of a suitcase, just to name a few unpleasant circumstances. And yet, he writes, and exuding joy, gratitude, hope, and confidence *in community* and *in Christ*.

This is the context in which Paul writes and teaches us something powerful about servant leadership—his unfavorable circumstances *and* his undeniable joy. I highlight that because we need joy to sustain us as we serve, and it comes from a source not dependent upon circumstance.

If that is the context for this passage about servant leadership, who are the addressees? Well, Paul, says, along with Timothy, "*to the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons,*" (vs 1).

First, Saints. Or *Hagios* in the Greek. This simply refers to those who are holy, or 'set apart.' Their set-apart-ness, their holiness is related to their connection to God, their sense of the sacred. Notice that *hagios*, saint, does not mean people who have died, although saints can include those who have died. But Paul addresses the saints, *who are alive and well*, at Philippi. Which is to say, the people of God, the people of Christ's church, are saints, people 'set-apart' in the sense that they tend to the holy, the sacred, the God-ness of the world. To be a part of a faith community is to be a saint in

this sense. We realize that somehow, somehow our existence is connected to finding, seeing, experiencing the holy...and sharing that with others. We see more than just what is right before us. We see the invisible ink of God's presence in the world, that becomes visible when we add our own acts of love and justice and mercy to what God is doing. This is what it means to co-create the kin-dom of God, I think, or as one pastor put it, to bring out the God-colors in the world.

So if everyone in the church is a "saint," what then are bishops and deacons?

Episkopos, bishops (and yes that sounds a lot like Episcopal for a reason!), are overseers, guardians, curators. You can think of them as the ones who make the decisions for the community, or for the church. You might be familiar with how bishops in other branches of Christianity work...they oversee the churches and pastors in a region, they make decisions that others have to follow. What they say goes. They no doubt seek the counsel of God and others, but they do have final authority.

Now there's a reason we Baptists don't have bishops. We feel that it is *the people*, the congregation, who are to be the overseers, the deciders, the guardians of our community. Which is why we, at Calvary, have the congregation vote on major decisions we make. No bishop or pastor or single group of leaders can decide that for us. Our collective wisdom and discerning of God's spirit comes from ALL of us.

Now, even though we don't have bishops, that distinction is important for how we understand deacons, *diakonos*, in our setting. Because the word *diakonos* literally comes from the words *dia* (through) and *konos* (dust), meaning, people who get their feet dusty as they scurry around doing ministry and serving others! It is not about power or overseeing or controlling, it's about making an impact on people's lives through service. And I hope the dusty feet thing adds even more symbolism to why Jesus washes his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. Their feet would have been very 'dusty' as fellow servant leaders, so it emphasizes their role as servants, and Jesus as servant to the servants, by cleaning their feet.

Most Greek dictionaries will define *diakonos*, not with its root words, but with its holistic meaning of ‘servant’. It’s used about 30 times (in this form) in the New Testament. While similar words like *doulos* (translated slave) emphasizes who you belong to, in contrast, *diakonos*, emphasizes *what you do*.¹

It’s action oriented. A *diakonos* carries out tasks for the benefit of someone else. “It originally described a waiter serving a meal, like the servants at the wedding at Cana (John 2:5, 9)...The word emphasizes *the work* that that is done more than focusing on the One in whose name you are doing the work. Both are important, but when in doubt, more so than talking about what one believes in God, *diakonos deacons* seek to serve and love in the manner of Jesus. That’s important. Especially as Baptists. Our deacons are not sitting around in the Board Room deciding how you or anyone else should believe or think about God and Christ, they are working on opening up opportunities for you to use

your gifts and skills to live out your faith as you see fit!

What I love about this passage in Philippians is that Paul shows us these categories of people, naming us all as saints, one who live in awe of the presence of God and then distinguishes some as deacons, ones who serve through action, meeting the needs of others. But for all of you who might be sitting out there thinking, great! I’m not one of Calvary’s 14 deacons, so I don’t need to worry about serving, I can just be a saint, and live with awe and reverence for God...*not so fast!*

You see, in truth, we are actually ALL *diakonos*, servants. But we are choosing to set apart 14 people for *this season* to be leaders who intentionally show us how to serve and who invite us into ways we can engage our gifts and skills that support the vision and mission of Calvary. As one pastor said, *diakonos* instead of being defined as servant leaders might best be understood as ***Leading Servants***.² We are all servants, it’s just that these 14 are leading us in specific ways

¹ Dr. John Bechtle, “Doulos and Diakonos: Dual Servanthood: Greek Word of the Week,” *Ezra Project* (21 August 2021), accessed on July 28, 2024 at <https://ezraproject.com/doulos-and-diakonos-dual-servanthood/>.

² David Platt & Alex Schroeder, “Radical Restoration: Deacons – Leading Servants of the Church,” *Radical* (7 August 2017), accessed on July 28, 2024 at <https://radical.net/podcasts/radical-podcast/radical-restoration-deacons-leading-servants-of-the-church/>.

to serve in this specific season in this specific church.

In fact, our whole new structure depends upon engaging ALL of us in service, particularly with two new Deacon co-leads whose focus is matching the congregation's gifts with the church's needs. This structure is about engagement, so that we are *all* able to serve as we are gifted. And our deacons, are the ones who are leading us in this effort. That's what sets the apart for this season.

One of my favorite passages about deacons is in Acts 6; it's when the first seven deacons are appointed. And these seven were chosen because there was a specific need. The disciples had so much to do as the numbers of followers of Jesus grew, and they noticed that the widows in their community were being overlooked in the distribution of food. So they said, it's not right that the widows are being neglected and it's not right for us to neglect our other duties to serve the tables to ensure the widows are fed.

Their solution? They asked the community to select seven leaders who could be set apart and asked to do this specific

task for a season, so the disciples could do what they needed to do. So seven were chosen, and the disciples laid hands on them and blessed them (just as we did two weeks ago with our deacons), and then these seven helped ensure the widows were fed and the text says, "the word of God continued to spread," meaning, because the deacons were doing what they did, the disciples could do what they needed to do, and more people came to know and experience the love of God.

And do you know what else?

These deacons were appointed to meet a specific need, and they served to meet that specific need, but then we don't hear these people referred to as deacons again later in scripture. It's not like all the sudden, these seven became *so prominent* that we know their names as well as we do the disciples. No, in all likelihood, they did their role in caring for the widows in the background and went on with their lives in other ways they were serving.

I point this out to say, in some churches you will see deacons appointed for "all time" and anointed as 'servant leaders' for

their church, and that lasts basically until they die.

Other churches have a rotational model of deacon service, where you serve a few years, then rotate off, and others are nominated to serve.

At Calvary, we've kind of made a Third Way, if you will. We've left the term of service of a deacon up to the discernment of the deacon and our community and God.

Meaning, if the deacon is serving in a role that is using their gifts and skills and it makes sense for them to keep serving in that role because they are in the middle of leading projects and ministries and to change leadership would be more disruptive than helpful, then they can keep leading. If someone feels like their term of service is up after a year and it's time for someone else to lead, they can step down. The seasons are determined by need, calling, and gifting, not a "one size fits all" structure.

Instead of having deacons 'ordained' or selected for the rest of their lives and instead of having deacons 'ordained' or selected for a pre-determined term of service, we are inviting

our deacons to determine their term of service, with the collective wisdom of the community and God's Spirit.

I mention Acts 6 as it pertains to Calvary simply to reiterate that not only are deacons not 'overseers' or bishop-types for our church, they are also not special people who are uber-spiritual or who we think are better servant leaders than any of the rest of our congregation. Yes they are gifted and beloved, and yes they reveal a unique glimpse of the image of God, however being a deacon is more about their gifts and skills and their *YES in this season of their lives* matching with Calvary's needs for specific roles in *this season of our community's life*.

Seasons change, and our deacons will too.

Our 14 *diakonos* are our leading servants for this season Calvary. And aren't we grateful they said YES! They are elected by us to serve in specific ministry areas at Calvary and to provide collective leadership on our Ministry Advisory Board and Executive Board.

I can't end the sermon though, or our discussion on what it means to be a deacon at

Calvary, without returning to Paul's words in Philippians. For these next sentences flesh out *how* deacons serve, as partners and as ones who know their work will outlast them and never be finished.

Paul speaks with gratitude about the partnership he shares with the people of Philippi in his gospel work. The word for 'partnership' here is *koinonios* – which means communion, participation with, association with, fellowship (of a closeknit nature, not merely social).

The gospel work (that is the work of sharing the good news, the love of God with others) is not something we can do alone, and that our deacons can do alone. They serve and lead in partnership with our staff AND in partner with you, the congregation! We are all part of this *koinonia*, this communion and fellowship, and the ministry of experiencing and sharing God's love is done in partnership, together. Not by one pastor or a staff. Not by deacons or leading servants. And not even by all of us as the

Calvary congregation. We need partners beyond our walls, too.

Which is why part of our new structure is about using vision and discernment, and the means of formation and engagement to cultivate healthy partnerships with mission and advocacy organizations who are doing ministry in ways we cannot on our own. We need their expertise and reach. We do not need to re-invent the wheel. What might be God calling us to do with the partners who are around us?³ What does good partnership look like for us here at Calvary?

When we realize we do not have to fix the problems of the world at home, we find *great joy* in partnership together. And the Olympics can remind us of some key truths about partnership.

Did you all see who won the first gold medal for the U.S.? It was the Men's swimming team in the 4x100 relay without Chris Guiliano and Jack Alexy and Hunter Armstrong and Caeleb Dressel...that medal doesn't

³ Some of us are exploring this question as it relates to the Tamarac Family Shelter. We are next door to the most stable and successful *All in Mile High* family shelter in our city, that has already, consistently housed families in about 200 rooms per night since late December, providing 497 people with support services and case management, including 55 people employed,

160 receiving vital documentation, and 93 families relocated to permanent housing. This is good news! How might we partner in the good work and good news that is already happening down the block from us? We have an extraordinary opportunity that many churches in our city do not. God has put this opportunity right next door. How will we respond?

happen without each swimmer's talents giving their all. We watched it in real time. The first swimmer a bit behind but holding his own. Then the second swimmer catches up and closes the gap. Then the lead comes in the third leg, which allows for the fourth swimmer to finish the race whole body lengths ahead of their competition, each person's efforts creating the win. Relay sports in the Olympics are such great reminders of partnership, and how we rise together and fall together. And either way, we are together. But that medal doesn't happen with my gifts diving in after your gifts, tag teaming back to my gifts, and then followed by your gifts. It's all of us together!

And even more, sometimes, we must realize that we are in partnership with people who we do not know the names of and will never know. Like the mysterious, masked torch bearer in the opening ceremonies in Paris, who carried the Olympic torch along rooftops, jumping from building to building, taking spectators on a journey into Paris' rich cultural heritage and history, until finally

handing off the torch to the famed French footballer Zinedine Zidane before disappearing,⁴—leaving the internet abuzz wondering who IS that person?—Sometimes we do not know the names of the people who pass the torch to us and we won't always know the names of who we will pass the torch on to...yet we carry it anyway, don't we!? Because THIS is OUR time. This is OUR leg of the relay. And we will not break the chain or the momentum that has been handed to us; we will continue what God is doing in the world.

Whether it's our ancestors from generations ago or people around the block from us today who are making a difference in their own way, knowing we are partners in the gospel doesn't mean we always have to know who are partners are, but we need to trust *they are out there* and they are doing great and needed work. It is not all about us. The church, Calvary or any other church does not have all the answers.

A final example from the Olympics on healthy partnerships: now competing in

⁴ Marc Fortier, "Identity of masked Olympic torchbearer remains a mystery," *NBC Boston* (27 July 2024), accessed on July 28, 2024 at

<https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/identity-of-masked-olympic-torchbearer-remains-a-mystery/3440281/>.

his third Olympic games, U.S. Men's Shot putter and discus thrower, Ryan Crouser, made a poignant observation about the difference between the opening ceremonies and the closing ceremonies: "The opening ceremony is regimented, with competitors appearing with their compatriots under their countries flag, waving, everyone divided up in groups by geographical, man-made demarcations and borders and countries, ready to prove they are better than the others. The closing ceremony though is totally different. What stands out to me is that you can go out in whatever order you want with your new friends, from any sport you want, any country you want; it's about the relationships you've made during the games, not the countries you've come to compete against. And *that* to me is the summary of the Olympics in a time when we have so many differences right now, at the close, we celebrate our relationships and our commonality."⁵

Our partners in the gospel may not be the people we think are already like us or of like spirit.

They may come from unexpected places. Perhaps people of different religions or no religion. Perhaps people of a different political party! When we view partnerships as much about relationships as we do the work we accomplish together, true transformation is possible.

Finally, Paul gives us the best encouragement and reminder, and frankly, a word that we need right now with all that is going on in our world. Paul reminds us that the Christ who calls us to serve others in love and to work for justice and peace in our world, the God who calls us to spread the Good News of God's love to all people and to receive and honor all people with dignity and joy—this God is alive and at work within us and through us AND will continue the good work that has begun long before us and will continue long after us. In other words, we play a vital role in how God's love and redemption and justice and peace will come to be in our world—AND it is not all up to *us*.

We will do plenty of things that we will never see the fruits of,

⁵ Adapted quote from Ira Porter, "We'll always have Paris. Can the Olympics cheer up a gloomy world?" *The Christian Science Monitor* (25 July 2024), accessed on July 28, 2024 at

<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Olympics/2024/0725/2024-olympics-paris-optimism-ryan-crouser-maggie-steffens>.

and yet they are still worth doing. Think of the ancestors of our faith, of our country, who have paved the way to liberation and freedom in ways that they never got to experience themselves. We do not do the work of God's kin-dom building simply for ourselves or our own enjoyment, we play our part in extending the "arc of the moral universe," as Dr. King coined it, "bending it more and more toward justice" because the alternative is what? Stopping that bend? Inhibiting the spread of God's love? Giving up because we cannot see the Light at the End of the Tunnel? Curbing the extension of justice to all people simply because we are tired or discouraged? No, we do what we can with what we can, knowing part is part of God's whole.

I was moved by two examples of this bold courage and servant leadership this week. In two areas that are absolutely horrific and tragic and feel so, so big and so, so sad.

The first came in that letter that 45 medical professionals sent to President Biden this week, including Jewish doctors,

imploping him to end military spending and support of Israel and the IDF, and calling for an immediate ceasefire. This was on the heels of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's warm welcome to the U.S. Congress and White House this week.

These doctors and nurses unanimously described treating children who had suffered injuries they believed must have been deliberately inflicted: *"Every one of us on a daily basis treated pre-teen children who were shot in the head and chest,"* they wrote. *"We wish you could see the nightmares that plague so many of us since we have returned: dreams of children maimed and mutilated by our (American-bought) weapons, and their inconsolable mothers begging us to save them. We wish you could hear the cries and screams our consciences will not let us forget."*⁶

Many in the group have public health backgrounds and experiences volunteering in other conflict zones such as Ukraine and Iraq. They write: *"We believe we are well positioned to comment on the*

⁶ Sahar Akbarzai, "'We cannot remain silent about what we saw.' US doctors who volunteered in Gaza demand ceasefire in letter to White House," *CNN* (26 July 2024),

accessed on July 28, 2024 at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/26/world/open-letter-45-us-physicians-gaza/index.html>.

massive human toll from Israel's attack on Gaza, especially the toll it has taken on women and children." One doctor wrote that his experiences in other conflict zones "*were not even comparable to what he had witnessed in Gaza; 90% of those he had seen killed there were women and children.*"⁷

This letter was a bold act of servant leadership. It won't fix everything, not. But it does say *something* that desperately NEEDS to be said.

Then there are the words of Sandra Massey, still ringing in our ears; her last breaths unmistakably tragic and unwaveringly prophetic. Her murder makes us question: we just continue to chalk up unacceptable police brutality and shootings to a 'few bad apples' without looking at the system that sent officers to the home of Sandra Massey who called the police for their help and yet somehow that calls ends in her murder, the life of yet another unarmed black woman gone in an instant? Her words ring as a call to justice for us all:

*"I rebuke you in the name of Jesus."*⁸

Sandra Massey's last words and actions are a prophetic call and witness to us all. My, my. Having Kamala Harris run as a presidential candidate is history making for women, for black women, for women of South-Asian descent AND yet even still as that history is being made, black women are still being killed in their homes by our law enforcement.

These are the realities and tensions that haunt us as Christians, and they should. And just because we cannot fix entire systems in a day, does not mean we should not be trying right now to change something. And to realize that our something is part of a great Something that God is up to in the world. If we wait, lives are in the balance. So, there is no waiting. And, even as we work for justice, we find joy, as Paul does, writing this letter from prison and with enemies pressing in on him from all sides, because we know our joy comes from a Christ who holds the long view on love. Who promises us and points us to a kin-dom of God's

⁷ Akbarzai, *ibid*.

⁸ Eric Levenson, "A step-by-step look at how law enforcement's visit to Sonya Massey's home went so

wrong," *CNN* (24 July 2024), accessed on July 28, 2024 at <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/23/us/sonya-massey-police-shooting-what-went-wrong/>.

love that will come in and through our actions and our service.

For all my deacons here today, who are feeling like, gosh, being a servant leader, a leading servant, is a big deal and I'm kind of feeling inadequate and doubting my abilities and wondering, am I up for the job?

Hear this: Yes, you are up for the job. You are called for such a time of this because of your gifts and skills, and we will continue to help equip you. You do not serve alone. And your service does not have to be perfect or without frustration or impatience or mistakes or times when your humanity shows all your faults and frailties.

Leadership is not about perfection. It's about presence. And you are already leading us in how to serve simply by saying YES. And, trust that it is not all up to you. You play a pivotal role, just as we all do. You have partners in this work. And even more, we all have the partnership of Christ, who has been at work in others before us and will continue the work we take part in long after we're gone.

Deacons, leading servants, are not the end all be all, and neither are any of us, my friends. Even

in this election, where so much is at stake, and where we must vote and advocate and pray, we also must remember that no human leader is god, and no matter what happens in November, the day after the election our call as Christians, as people who are to experience and share God's love with others, that call will be the same, no matter what. Let that ground you.

And let this prayer inspire you. It was written by the late Bishop Ken Untener, but is frequently connected with Archbishop Oscar Romero because of his martyrdom. While serving communion, Romero was shot and killed for his ceaseless advocacy for the poor:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

*The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
It is even beyond our vision.*

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that

*The Kingdom always lies
beyond us.*

*No statement says all that
should be said.
No prayer fully expressed our
faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings
wholeness.
No program accomplishes the
church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives
includes everything.*

This is what we are about.

*We plant the seeds that one day
will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
Knowing that they hold future
promise.
We lay foundations that will
need further development.
We provide yeast that produced
effects far beyond our
capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of
liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a
beginning,
A step along the way,*

*An opportunity for the Lord's
grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end
results,
But that is the difference
Between the master builder and
the worker.
We are workers, not master
builders,
Ministers [or diakonos!], not
messiahs.*

*We are prophets of a future that
is not our own.*

Amen.⁹

⁹ History and prayer may be accessed in many places,
including <http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/romero-prayer>.