

Energy, Intelligence, Imagination, Love

Romans 13:8-14

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ Kickoff Sunday/13th September 2020

Introduction:

Just prior to the 224th General Assembly, which was supposed to meet here in Baltimore in June, these shirts started to go on sale, with four words: energy, intelligence, imagination, love; along with the hashtag #WeAreTheChurch. Dorothy Boulton and I each bought one and we thought it would be fun to wear them in worship one week and talk about what these words mean to us. If you're a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA) you will know that they are taken from one of the Constitutional questions posed to Ruling Elders, Deacons, and Teaching Elders or ministers at ordination. Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

Each of the questions are important and serious, but after the first question—Do you trust in Jesus Christ your savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?—this question about service and the ministry of the church is perhaps our favorite and sums up the work we're called to do. On this KICKOFF Sunday we thought it would be good to reflect on these words. Dorothy is going to share what these words mean to her at this stage in her calling and I'll share mine.

Dorothy:

I first remember hearing this at my confirmation a long, long time ago, when I was 13 years old. We were all standing in a line and the minister was asking each of us to serve – one with energy, the next with intelligence, and so on down the line. There were a lot of us, and I remember being very excited as I figured out the word that I was going to get was the one I wanted! The funny thing is.... I can't remember now which one it was! Could have been intelligence, because at 13 I thought being smart was pretty darn important. Or it might have been imagination, because, well, creativity is awesome.

Whichever one it was, I know I've made those promises for myself using ALL of those words since then: first, when I became a deacon, and then later, when I was ordained a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, USA.

I like ALL of those words, all of the parts of that promise. And I like them all when I ask other people to make that promise too. When I was thinking about them for this morning, though, I want to share what I have discovered about those words, that promise in recent months: serving with energy, intelligence, imagination, love.... All are best when we serve together.

Since this COVID 19 crisis, let's be honest: all of these – energy, intelligence, etc.. are harder to come by, harder to sustain. It's been a long, difficult seven months, and no one knows how long this crisis will continue. But there's a proverb: if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

And so it's been the church --- the whole church -- and its commitment to serving the people with ENERGY, INTELLIGENCE, IMAGINATION and LOVE that has kept that promise strong.

I think, first of all, of my Presbyterian Christian Educator support group that meets on Zoom every two weeks. We've been sharing ideas and encouraging one another. We check in and see how everyone's doing. It's a way that we gather ENERGY... because help each other, and we care for one another.

Here's another thought: one of the most important ways we renew our ENERGY, sustain our ENERGY is through rest. We --- the staff at CPC -- have been trying hard here to take care of each other. If you're tired, and you've been working hard, and need a vacation --- hey, I'm here to support you. I'll carry the load for a while. Let me help. We'll figure out how you can renew your energy, your joy. I'm particularly grateful for our volunteer musicians, who have been sharing their gifts so beautifully in worship. Thank you!

And then, I need to lift up the amazing ENERGY of our Child Care Council and the staff & teachers of our child care center. During this pandemic, we're rediscovering just how vital this Center is. Because they knew that parents had jobs to get to, and their children needed care, they worked with incredible ENERGY to figure out how to open the center for the summer, and then for this fall. There were a lot of Zoom meetings around that, I can tell you. And their never-failing commitment to the needs of this community, and the mission of this church, has been impressive to witness. ENERGY. ENERGY. In the service of Christ and one another.

Let's move on...

I have, also, been awed and appreciative of the INTELLIGENCE of our church family during this time. A leading example is that of our session, the leadership of this congregation, which relied on the best medical and scientific information in order to make decisions about in-person worship gatherings, about the safety and health of our congregation. And they continue to evaluate and learn and discern, and shape our policies wisely and well.

I need to do a shout-out here as well for Keith Glennan, our session member who has taken on all of our tech work for filming and producing the online worship service. He's had to figure it all out, make the technology work, discover new techniques and tools. And he also had to have the smarts to volunteer his wife, Kathy Glennan, with his INTELLIGENT suggestion: Hey, Kathy can work the camera! Thank you, Keith --- thank you, Kathy. Thank you so very much.

IMAGINATION? Well, we can start with the Trustees. They're entrusted with the care and keeping of our church building and grounds --- which, you know, are absolutely lovely. And they've come up with a brilliant and creative idea for a pavilion! It would allow space outdoors for gatherings, with picnic tables, a space that could be used by the scouts, the youth groups, the child care center, even for outdoor worship! There's the IMAGINATION of our Christian Education Committee, as it seeks new ways to reach out to our children and youth and families. The Dismantling Racism team, who help us imagine a better society, and are seeking ways to help us all to get there.

And LOVE? LOVE. Love is what is binding us together during this time of separation. It's all of us, the Deacons who are praying for us, organizing meals; it's people who are sending cards and making phone calls. It's the contributing of pledges to fund our ministry. It's the reaching out to our neighbors.... through food assistance, school supplies, chili suppers.... It's LOVE that reminds us how we're connected even when we're apart.

ENERGY, INTELLIGENCE, IMAGINATION, LOVE. I thought those were my promises, but I know now how much they are our promises. We serve the Lord together. We serve the people together. We walk this road together. For that I say: Thanks be to you. Thanks be to God.

Ken:

Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

It sounds nice.

But if you think about it, this is a demanding question and not easy to answer.

All the time? All the people?

We answer: "I will." We should probably say, "I will, with God's help." Because it is impossible to truly serve without grace, without relying upon a deeper source of energy and intelligence and imagination and love. I want to give all that I can, but there's only so much that I can give. And therefore, I need the Spirit's strength and power to serve in this way. If I relied upon my own internal resources to find the energy, intelligence, imagination, and, most of all, love, to do this "job," to fulfill this calling, I would have given up a long time ago.

Every year on the anniversary of my ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, for 29 years, next week it will be 30, I take a moment to read through the ordination questions and ask myself if these are still true for me, then I answer. I reflect back upon my ordination, all the people who were there that afternoon in my home church, kneeling feet away from where I was baptized, and all the people who helped to shape and form me, and what was preached that day, the charge given to me, the responsibilities placed upon me, and I ask, "So, how I'm doing?"

I have tried to serve with energy.

I have tried to serve with intelligence. I was taught in my teens that ministry in the Presbyterian Church is "the life of the mind in service to God," and I have taken this *very* seriously in my ministry. Asking questions, inviting questions, thinking through the faith, engaging the church in theological reflection, celebrating theology—once known as the "queen of the sciences"—discovering what Christianly thinking and reasoning look like—or might look like.

I have tried to serve with imagination. My good buddy and friend Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said imagination is the most important faculty as a Christian because it informs everything else that we do.¹ It gives us the capacity to see possibilities. We all need *sanctified* imaginations in order to imagine different possibilities, different ways of living for people, to imagine a new and different world ordered by justice and fairness and radical hospitality and acceptance. When we imagine different futures for the church—and during this pandemic we are imagining new ways of doing church and being the church—we're given new possibilities, liberating us from the past and from traditions that no longer give life. When we imagine different futures, different

possibilities for people in our lives, they are free to let go of the past and live with joy into the future that God longs to give them.

Paul said, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another” (Romans 13:8). The greatest gift is love (1 Cor. 13:13). Christian love is never sentimental or nostalgic or simply being nice. It’s both tender and fierce. It redeems. It brings life. It renews. It extends hope. St. Augustine (354-430) said, “You cannot love what you do not know.”² And how do we come to know anything? Through love. Years ago, I came across a line by the Scottish poet Kathleen Raine (1908-2003). When I first heard it, it blew me away. It continues to teach me much, and I return to it often. She said, “Unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see a thing at all.”³ Love informs everything. Love helps us to see—we see *through* love.

And so, I’ve been thinking that it’s love—our love for God and God’s people, our love for ourselves—that gives us energy. And it’s love that informs intelligence, how we think, how we ask questions. And it’s love that cultivates our capacity to imagine. In love we imagine new ways of loving and forgiving and serving and being and relating. Love allows us to love.

As we both know, these words and questions are not only for the minister, the “professional Christian,” or the ordained Deacon or Elder. It’s the call to each of us, all of us *together*—as you said so beautifully, Dorothy, we do this work together.

We all signed on to this work in our baptism, when we confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior. We promised to follow him and walk in his ways with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love—by the grace of God, with God’s help. Amen.

¹ Imagination is “the capacity *instar omnium*.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30f.

² St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, X.1, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 286.

³ Cited in John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (HarperCollins, 1989), 65.