

Living the Gospel

When Ginny Coultas was the teacher of the “Fours- and-Fives” class at the First Presbyterian Preschool, she taught a unit each year called “What do people do all day?” She’d invite people from various walks of life to come in and explain to the children how they make their living.

As you can imagine, some visitors were far more exciting than others. One child’s father was a firefighter. He invited the children down to the fire station to see a demonstration of the firefighting equipment. Officer Mike, our beloved downtown police officer, stopped the traffic on West Tennessee Street so that the children could cross safely. They got to try on a firefighter’s helmet and sit behind the wheel of the ladder truck.

Another child’s mother was a police officer. She arrived in a patrol car and handed out plastic badges for the children to wear. Of course, the most interesting thing about her – at least for the boys – was the gun she wore on her hip. (I’m not being sexist; it’s just the case that little boys tend to take a great interest in guns.)

Every year, when the What-do-people-do-all-day? unit rolled around, Ginny would ask Michael Corzine to show the children what an organist and choirmaster does.

Of course, he would invite the children over here to the sanctuary for a demonstration of the Taylor and Boody organ. Now, THAT was interesting – until he opened both doors of the organ case, pulled out a bunch of stops, and fired off a few measures of uninhibited Bach. The four’s and five’s tended to put their hands over their ears and scurry under the pews when that happened.

One year, Ginny asked me to address the class. I was not a hit. I don’t have a fire truck. I don’t carry a gun or even a Taser. I don’t have a 26-stop organ with hundreds of pipes, and even if I did, I couldn’t play it with both hands and both feet.

What do I do all day? Well, I told the children, I read books and papers. I go to meetings. I talk with people when they’re sad or curious or even angry. Sometimes I talk to couples who want to get married. I stand by gravesides and talk about how

much God loves us. I visit people who are sick and together we talk to God. I read the Bible and I prepare a talk every week about the people and the stories that I find within its covers. And, most Sundays, I stand at a big Table where I take, bless, break, pour, and give a special meal.

That's it? That's what you do all day? Don't you any work?

As a visiting lecturer to four and five-year olds, I'm a big disappointment. My saving grace is, I am the person in the Preschool who keeps the trikes repaired and fixes broken chairs and toys.

The other day, I was down there, and heard a child say to another, "That's just Mr. Brant. He's Miss Andra's Daddy."

Looking back on last week and on what passes for work, I feel as though I should drop the Apostle Paul a note and let him know that his words to us in his letter from prison have not gone unheard.

Yes, I know his letter was intended for the church in Philippi and that it was written way back in the first century, but to me it has a contemporary ring. He calls us "**my brothers and sisters,**" my "**beloved,**" "**my joy and my crown,**" and he tells us to "**stand firm in the Lord.**"

I want to write Paul, or send him a text, if he's allowed a cell phone in that prison in Rome, and tell him that's exactly what this church is doing. We're standing firm in the Lord. I know, because, as I go about my "work," such as it is, I see evidence everywhere I go.

Last Monday, before I snuck off to practice with the Community Chorus, I watched some of you gather for "Ministry Night." After sharing a meal, you broke into "Ministry Teams" and worked together, being the church in this community. Some of you reviewed the list of folks who are undergoing treatment for cancer.

- "Who needs a meal?" you asked.
- "Who could use a visit?"
- "How can we help a caregiver who might be feeling overwhelmed?"

Every one of you is busy with your own life, just as the Philippians must have been busy with theirs, but somehow you carve out time to strengthen the “tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.”

Others of you worked on issues of compassion and social justice.

- “How do we get the rights of former prisoners restored, so that they can be contributing members of society and take their place in our democracy?” you asked.
- “How can we help our brothers and sisters in Cuba recover from the hurricane?”
- “How are the plans going for a Thanksgiving meal for newly-arrived refugee families? Do you think we should invite the Governor? We know how keen he is to welcome refugees. He’s lives just down the street. Let’s invite him!” (Not every suggestion is successful.)

There were only three of us in Worship Team meeting, but we had a good discussion. We talked about the Lord’s Supper and wondered out loud why it’s missing every now and then from the Lord’s Day liturgy.

“Why?” we wondered. Nobody could come up with a good answer.

On Tuesday afternoon last week, I went over to the Health Center at Westminster Oaks to see Catherine Patrick. She was resting comfortably, but didn’t wake. I read her some scripture anyway. Who knows what a person can hear when so close to the gates of heaven?

I dropped by to see another sister in Christ. She told me how important to her are the visits she receives from another church member, and how a certain college student visits her every time he comes home from college. (He’s a Gator, but she doesn’t hold that against him.)

“**Beloved,**” writes Paul, “**Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing . . . think on these things.**”

I thought about the ministry Daniel Jordan has at Westminster Oaks as an aide and transportation specialist. I thought about Robyn Stephenson, nurse extraordinaire. I thought about the notes and cards displayed on desktops and taped to walls in folk’s rooms. “. . . **whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**”

I made a couple of visits to Hospice House this week. I saw an old friend of the congregation whose name isn't on the rolls, but who always considered herself a Presbyterian at heart. Her daughter was there. We prayed together and commended her mother to God. We called on the Lord to welcome "a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of you own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

"Receive her into the arms of your mercy," we prayed, "into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light."

I thought of how Glenn Hodges volunteers as a night chaplain at the Hospice House, and of the countless families he has touched in his ministry.

On Friday morning, I was attending a retreat for the Big Bend Hospice Board of Directors. A new member of the Board came over to me at the coffee break. "You won't remember me," he said, "but you married me and my wife 20 years ago. We have two children now. One's in college. The other is in high school. We're active in another church, but we remember your church fondly because you opened your doors when other churches closed theirs.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone . . ."

The mother of two texted me. "It's payday today, but after paying my bills, I'll only have \$17.00 left to feed my family."

I texted her back and told her about the food give-away at Grace Mission Saturday morning and about the Manna on Meridian Food Bank over at Faith Presbyterian Church, which opens every third Saturday of the month.

This congregation can't be the church all by ourselves. We've got partners in the gospel all over town.

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests be known to God."

Everywhere I have turned this week, I have run into the church being the church.

And, in one conversation I ran into the church being something less. I was talking with a couple who is soon to enter the covenant of marriage. After about an hour of conversation, I popped the question. Not that one. This one: “Do you have a church home?”

“Well,” the future bride said. “I used to. I grew up in that church. I was baptized there. I taught Sunday School. But I was asked to leave. They kicked me out because my fiancé and I were living together. I won’t go back there again.”

Sometimes disciples of Jesus Christ get so focused on what they regard as right that they lose sight of what’s good. When that happens, we need to ask ourselves, “Where’s the gospel in what we’re doing? Where’s the love of God in Jesus Christ, the source of all rejoicing? Who, after all, is invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb? Is it only the righteous? Or is it everyone whom the Lord our God calls?”

What I do might not be called “work” by everybody – especially by four and five-olds. But it’s the just about the most blessed and joyous thing anybody could be called to do. Why? Because I get to see the gospel at work.

“Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,” Paul writes, **“and the God of peace be with you.”**

Dear Paul, we’re on it.