

“You Can’t Do It All!”

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Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

When missionary Bill Wallace began his storied work in China, he was overwhelmed by the immensity of the need. Desperate and despairing, he asked a veteran of many years service what, if anything, he could do.

The experienced missionary told Wallace he was experiencing a "crisis of compassion" and he could respond in one of three ways: He could become hardened to the needs; he could let the magnitude of the needs drive him to a frenzy that would eventually break him; or he could determine to do what he could and leave the rest to God.

“You can’t do it all!” There’s a lot of wisdom in that statement and it’s a lesson I have to keep re-learning.

Most mornings when I open my inbox, there are at least three or four new appeals for Knollwood or me to invest ourselves in some worthy cause. And these are not things it is easy to say “No” to. These are invitations or appeals it is *hard* to say “No” too.

But we can’t just keep adding to our already bursting portfolio of ministries; to do so saps our energy and focus to do anything well. So, one of my hardest jobs as a pastor is saying “No” to many of the compelling causes clamoring for my attention.

I suspect it is no different in your world. Your work, your family, your volunteer service commitments, they always seem to need more of you than you have to give. So how do you decide when to say “No” so you’ll have the time and energy to say “Yes” to what matters most?

These are not new questions. The church in Corinth faced a similar quandary. On the one hand, there were those in the church who thought *their* cause ought to be everybody’s cause. And their cause was “speaking in tongues,” an ecstatic form of worship not unique to Christianity, but common in the Greek mystery religions of the time.

Meanwhile, others in the congregation felt shamed and rejected because they didn’t have that particular gift. They thought what they had to give didn’t matter.

Paul wades into this witch’s brew of hyper-spirituality, on the one hand, and a crippling self-doubt on the other, with his razor-sharp theological instincts. And he makes two basic points that can guide us in deciding where to invest and where to leave some worthy cause to others.

The first point is everyone has some spiritual gift he or she holds in trust for the common good. So while “you can’t do everything!” you can do *something!*

And secondly, the criterion for deciding what matters most both to God and to you is the confession “Jesus is Lord!” Which for me, boils down not to, “What would Jesus do?” which is in itself a notoriously difficult question to answer given our very different place and time. But perhaps a better question is, “What would Jesus have *me* do?” or “What would Jesus have *us* do?” Meaning what particular piece of kingdom work are we uniquely positioned and gifted to do?

As to the first point, Paul begins our New Testament reading from 1 Corinthians 12, “Now concerning *spiritual gifts*, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.” You might be surprised to learn that the term, “spiritual gifts,” does not actually appear in the Greek New Testament. What Paul literally says is, “Now concerning the *spirituals*,” which may well refer to the spiritual trouble-makers at Corinth who believed their gift speaking in tongues was more important than anybody else’s.

Instead of writing about “spiritual gifts,” Paul simply speaks of gifts, activities, and services. Thus a spiritual gift is not some exotic, special class of giftedness. Spiritual gifts are simply, your native gifts turned to some spiritual, or better said, kingdom purpose.

In her book, *The Eighth Day of Creation*, Elizabeth O’Connor recalls the old story about Michelangelo pushing a huge piece of granite down the road. Observing this, a passerby asked the master sculptor why he was taking this craggy, blemished chunk of stone to his studio.

“Because,” Michelangelo answered, “there is an angel in that rock trying to get out.”

Even so, writes O’Connor, “Every person has the task of releasing angels by shaping and transfiguring the raw materials that lie about [us]. . . . How we do this is determined by the discovery and the use of our gifts.”

So if you have a gift for teaching, whether you use that vital skill in a failing public school or in our Sunday School or better yet, in *both*, it is a spiritual gift to the extent that you use that gift in kingdom service.

If you have a gift for advocacy--giving a voice to those without access to power like the prophet Isaiah who cries, “For Zion’s sake, *I will not keep silent!*”, that is a spiritual gift if using it in a loving, liberating, life-giving way.

If you have a gift for caring, what makes that a spiritual gift is not whether you use that gift in your work as a chaplain or as a grandma. What matters is whether and how you use your special gift to love others as God in Christ has loved you. After all, as Paul will unpack in the next chapter of 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, the greatest gift is not speaking in tongues, or preaching, or performing. The greatest gift . . . is *love*.

No, “You can’t do it all!” But you can do *something*. What is that unique something God has gifted you to do? Focus on that instead of all the other important causes clamoring for your attention; for that is the gift of grace God has uniquely positioned you to give. That is your leverage point for nudging this beautiful, but broken world, a little closer to the kingdom of God.

And what about Knollwood? How do we decide where to leverage our gifts and resources to make the biggest difference as a congregation?

We decide by listening for, looking for, and paying attention to is where the Spirit is bubbling up in our church's life. Where are the congregation's energy and gifts and calling coalescing about a particular crisis, opportunity, or need?

A case in point is this congregation's emerging commitment to racial reconciliation and justice. In the wake of Charleston and Charlottesville and all the other ugly incidents of racial bigotry and violence in recent years, many in our congregation have been convicted and stirred to action. They are eager to use their gifts to address the racial divide in our community and nation.

As David Wilkinson pointed out last Wednesday night, while speaking about Baptist identity, this year marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first slave ship in America. The hideous practice of slavery that shaped and misshaped America continues to impact us to this very day, not only in racial attitudes and bias, but in the ways the system is often stacked against people of color.

If you're willing to experience a moving exploration of that theme--one that will slip past your head and grab hold of your heart--go see the movie, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. It's the story of two young people, madly in love and then torn apart when a young black man is spirited away to prison for a crime he did not commit.

Last year, our deacon executive council appointed a racial equity task force to help our congregation grapple with such issues. That group sponsored a racial equity training at our church, as well as helped to birth a number of other initiatives, including as a reading group on white privilege and a monthly lunch and learn called "Faith in the City." At one of those lunches, I learned about a form of racial inequity I knew nothing about: it's called "the summer slide."

The "summer slide" refers to how children from economically disadvantaged families who are disproportionately families of color, keep slipping farther and farther behind in school. Such

children come to kindergarten school already about six months behind in learning as compared to their middle-class peers.

Now in kindergarten, the two groups learn at about the same rate. But the next summer, the economically disadvantaged child falls farther behind because she has no summer reading, no summer trips, no camps, and precious few trips to the library, museum, or zoo.

Again, in first grade, the poorer children learn at about the same rate as the more privileged children. But each summer, they fall farther and farther behind through no fault of their own, but because they lack the opportunities most of us take for granted. That's why pre-k and summer enrichment programs for at risk children are so important.

Such children need someone like Mary, the mother of Jesus, to stand up and name the problem: "They have no wine!" or in this case, "They have no books!"

So Jesus calls his people together and tells them with his help to do something--not *everything*, but *something*--to make a bad situation better. Which is why this church, has made "Books for Bolton" a major initiative. Each Christmas, spring, and summer, we make sure every child at Bolton--a nearby Title I school--has a new book they can call their own. Why? Because reading is power and it's one way such children can start clawing out of the chasm where a hard life dropped them. And that is also why gifted Knollwoodians go to Bolton each week to befriend and mentor these children.

No, "You can't do it all!", but you can do something. So what is that *something* Jesus is calling you to do?

One promising opportunity to find out might be an interracial gathering for people of faith coming to our city in February. An interracial group of pastors and church leaders is hosting a musical at the Stephens Center. This musical chronicles the 1968 Memphis sanitary strike that culminated in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The next day, a forum will be held at Union Baptist Church, a predominantly African-American congregation. At that forum, we'll worship and connect and converse with our African- American brothers and sisters in Christ.

But this is not just a feel good event. There will also be hard conversations about the racial challenges in our city and possible pathways to hope and help. I've signed on as a host pastor for this event and I hope some of you will join me. Stay tuned for details about how you can be involved *if* you think this might be something the Spirit is calling you to do.

Had he lived, our Baptist brother and fellow believer, Martin Luther King, Jr., would have turned 90 last week. Shortly before he died, he mused about turning 90, and what that would be like if one missed his, her calling.

"You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be," said Dr. King. "And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, and some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid. You refuse to do it because you want to live longer. You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity. . .

"Well, you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit."

No, "You can't do it all!", but you can do *something!* And under God, it's vitally important to find out what that something is.

Because you have a gift no one else has in exactly the same way as you. So if you withhold it or refuse to claim it, there will be some bit of kingdom work left undone because Jesus was counting on *You!*

Crucified and Risen One, even *you* couldn't do it all. So you birthed a Spirit-breathed movement of kingdom people called the church to continue what you started.

Help us as individuals, and Knollwood as a congregation, find the unique and holy work you have for *us* to do. Help us find and use our gifts in serving the common good.

We ask this in your name, but for the sake of a beautiful, but broken world, Amen