

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

11 November 2018
Armistice Day (Veterans' Day)

“Giving of Ourselves”

Hebrew Scripture: Exodus 31:1-11
Christian Scripture: Romans 12:5-8

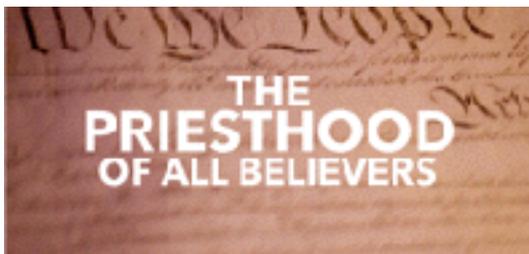


I am not sure I have ever preached on Bezalel and Oholiab before. I don't recall them really being the subject of many Sunday School lessons. We heard of Adam and Eve, Moses and Abraham and Noah, and even Jonah. Sure, we learnt of these characters and hear of them often throughout our faith journey. After reading this morning's lesson, I thought, you know, perhaps it is about time that Bezalel and Oholiab receive some 'love', some credit; I sort of feel its necessary to preach on them.

Our former President John F Kennedy once said, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” This

morning, I would like to appreciate Bezalel and Oholiab, perhaps for the first time in this church.

One of the things I have realized at this church is that while the minister of the church is seen as important, it is you the people in the pews that make everything work. I am not ignorant to the reality that for many years while various interim ministers were here (such as Bert, Sandy, Shanya, and David) these ministers were part-time, or in even less than part-time, and it was really you, you in the pews, who enabled this congregation to continue to serve the needs of the community and live-out the gospel through your support of ministries all around the world. We will focus on these ministries next week.



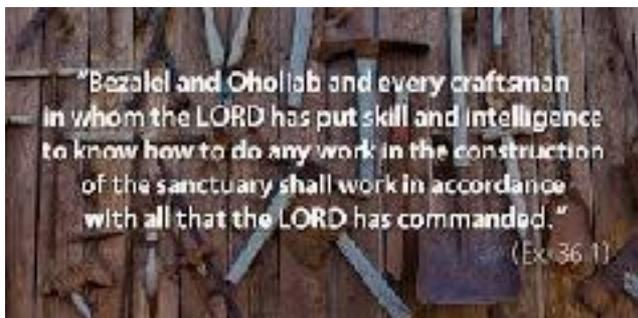
In true Congregational fashion, you have in the past you, and continue in the present, to embody the 'priesthood of all believers' (I Peter 2:9-10) through your dedication to this church. And because believers have all sorts of gifts and talents, vocations and skills, the priesthood gathered here in this church is enormously varied.

Biblical interpreters tell us that the ancient Hebrews had a very integrated view of life.¹ The ancient Hebrews understood that the skill of the craftsman was no less an inspiration from God than the words or lyrics of the poet or composer. The skill of the craftsmen was no less divinely inspired than that of the prophet and priest. And this really makes sense, when you think about how close, how intimate, their world was. (I still do not have chairs in home because of tariffs imposed on China. So, not only have I no chairs, but because our world is so big now, I can hardly appreciate the craftsmen who made them - if I ever get them.) Today, we are so far removed from the farmer that children rarely know from where food comes anymore (except I am learning that to a large extent food grown locally at local Vermont farms is almost an anomaly in this day and age). Our music can be live-streamed from anywhere around the world, so even musicians are less appreciated today than they were than in ancient days. (Of course, in our beautiful town we prove to be the exception; live opera, jazz and chamber music is at our doorstep almost on a daily basis.)

¹ Gray, John. "The Book of Exodus", *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1971), 63.



What I am trying to say is that because the ancient Hebrew world was so much more intimate compared to ours, they had, I think, a greater appreciation of the degree to which God empowers any skill that worshippers used to tell the story of God's goodness and grace.



In our scripture today, it says quite simply but beautifully, “I have filled Bezael with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence and knowledge of every kind of craft” (Exodus 31:3).



The scripture continues, “I have given Oholiab [...] and to all the craftsman, the skills” to do their work” (Exodus 31:6). We have here in our Hebrew reading a beautiful example in Bezalel and Oholiab of skills given by God returned to prosper the work of God.

I have witnessed the same here at this church: people of God returning through their skills the gifts of God. I have seen the lawyer, offering direction and advice - the way a good lawyer should - to this church. I have seen those who work with and know property, lend their expertise to this church. I have seen seamstresses, quilters and sewers form and mend the vestments, mine specifically. I have seen men and women perform the thankless, but important, tasks of cleaning. I have seen others with the gift of organization improve our church space. I have seen others with the artistic gift of creating bulletin boards. We have bush-whackers and landscapers extraordinaire! I marvel at the gifts of acting and singing in this church that have been employed for the service of God in this sanctuary. I have observed educators doing what they do best. I have seen bean counters count those beans, serving as the engine of this church enabling funds to be converted from minted and printed currency to be the demonstrated gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

Friends in Christ, I have seen how some of you have dedicated so much to this church that it hurts. I have seen many of you give to this church even when it felt as if the church did not give back to you. And, I want to apologize to you, as the minister, when this church or any church for that matter, did not give back to you a portion of that which you have already given so selflessly and sacrificially.

So, Anne, Lisa, and Lynn, I am ruining another Stewardship Campaign sermon by not necessarily asking more from the members of this church. I know that may seem strange. But, I see some of the people in this church giving so much that I fear it may break them - or at least burn them out. So, this morning, I wish to affirm all of you sitting in the pews, I wish to affirm you for doing that which is often so little recognised. How often have we read the Bible and not paused to give honor and praise Bezalel and Oholiab? We should be ashamed to pass over them, for they poured their heart and souls into the ministry of God through their skills and crafts! And how often have we not recognised our own saints who are often overlooked and underappreciated?



Friends, we are reminded in our text from Romans that our gifts are varied. What Tina and Bruce do and what John does is no less valuable in my sight and in God’s sight than what I do. What any of you do in the service of this church is equal to anything that I may do. In fact, truth be told, I am the least of you. What if any credit is due to me for what I do when I am remunerated? Praise be to God for you, who do what you do for the church and the world because of your selfless and compassionate natures!



Like Bezalel and Oholiab, praise be to God for your gifts and your skills given to you for the fostering of the kingdom of God on earth just as it is in heaven.

Allow me to conclude with only this: For those of you who perhaps cannot give of your time and your talents to the church due

to other valuable and necessary commitments, do not be convicted today. I ask you to not leave with heavy hearts because you for good reasons have other responsibilities. Instead, I ask you to consider giving more financially to this church than you are currently, so that you are able to support and affirm your brothers and sisters here who are at the church on a daily basis giving of their time and talents. For it matters not whether you give your treasure, time or talents. What does matter is that you somehow give of yourself by affirming and supporting your brothers and sisters who are giving of themselves.

This was the word of God, preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, 'Amen'!