

Michael Gehring
“Soli Deo Gloria”
I Corinthians 3: 5-11
Main Street UMC
July 15, 2018

I want to begin today by thanking all of you for the incredibly warm welcome that Rhonda and I have received. After it was announced that we were coming here, while we were still in Statesville, we started receiving cards in the mail, Facebook friend requests and messages, emails, gift cards, and phone calls. After we got here a wonderful meal from SPR and an incredible gift basket from the staff. Let me tell you what you already know, you have a great staff and they are incredibly welcoming and so very eager to help. We’ve had members of the church stopping by dropping off food, and more cards, phone calls, messages, warm smiles. I knew from all of that that you all are truly children of John Wesley, warm hearts all the way through. Thank all of you who are taking Pastor Claude’s advice to heart and are faithfully wearing your names tags, what a help and a blessing that is as well.

I also want to thank Claude and Lorie for the warm welcome they have extended. They treated us to an incredible meal at J. Pepper’s restaurant the day we came to see the parsonage and since that day have gone way out of their way to help us in any way that they can. They’ve answered phone calls, text messages, and emails graciously and patiently. Now they might have thought “oh my Lord bless these poor people’s hearts” but if they did they never showed it.

I also want to thank Jeff Patterson for the welcome that he has extended. I’m looking forward to having conversations with him about C.S. Lewis. I don’t know if you have heard that I have a not exactly small interest in Lewis.

While I was in Statesville, I also received this wonderfully welcoming email from Al Ward. Now I don’t know if you know how incredibly intimidating it is to stand up here in the pulpit that has been occupied by Al, Jeff, and Claude but it certainly is.

I feel a little bit like a friend of mine who was following a pastor who had served the church faithfully and well for 18 years and was a living legend in that community and in that church, one of great churches of Indiana. Rob Fuquay in his first sermon at St. Luke’s UMC in Indianapolis said that he felt a little bit like Admiral James Stockdale. Don’t feel bad if you don’t remember him. He was Ross Perot’s VP candidate. No one really knew who he was and in the 1992 Vice-Presidential Debate he began his opening comments by asking two questions, “Who am I and why am I here?” I’ve been asking myself that same question. How did I get appointed to one of the great churches in the Western North Carolina

Conference? While I was at Lake Junaluska at Annual Conference all these preachers, some I didn't even know were coming up to me and congratulating me on being appointed to Main Street. Rob, in his sermon, wondered how he got from North Carolina to Indianapolis and that got me asking existential questions. Here I am Lord, just a farm boy... (from the only state mentioned in the Bible. You do remember that passage from Genesis, right? Noah came out of the Ark and saw), here I am just someone from the wilderness blessed to be serving with you all in such a great church... Who am I and why am I here?

Rob noted that the Apostle Paul asked those same two questions in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul also had raised another question in the letter, to what end do I live and serve? Those are three good questions for all of us to ask ourselves: who am I? Why am I here? And to what end do I live and serve?

Paul found the church in Corinth around 49 or 50 AD. Corinth was a tough place to plant a church. It was city full ships, sailors, and people from all parts of the known world. It was cosmopolitan but not refined. As William Barclay said Corinth was a city filled with hucksters, opportunists, ex-soldiers, merchants, and peddlers of every kind of vice; in fact, the Greek word for Corinthian became a description of someone who lived in drunkenness or debauchery. In ancient plays a Corinthian was portrayed as a drunk. Corinth had the Temple of Aphrodite's that had some 1000 priestesses who descended from the mountain in the evenings to entice sailors. Corinth was indeed a significant church planting challenge.

Remember that line from the great British cricketer and missionary C.T. Studd. C.T. said, "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

Planting a church in Corinth was kind of like that. Four or so have gone by. Paul is now in Ephesus and he's hearing some reports that are greatly concerning him. Paul toiled through sweat and blood to found that church, but all is not well. He's hearing troubling reports; reports about immorality in the church; reports about factions. And that's no small concern for Paul. In the very first chapter, verse 11 Paul wrote, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,'..."

Now I guess we would say I belong to John Wesley, or to John Calvin, or to Martin Luther, or to the Pope, or to this charismatic preacher or that one. And Paul beautifully responded to those claiming him, "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Paul wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." Paul wrote it's all about God; it's all about Jesus, we are just servants, working the fields, and it's God who gives the harvest.

What a privilege and what an honor it is to be your new Senior Pastor. I was so inspired when I walked into the gathering area and read upon the wall these words: *Our mission at Main Street is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.* Now that's a vision, a vocation, a calling and let us strive faithfully to live into these as we grow in Christ and go forth in service. Van Gogh has a beautiful painting of a sower in the fields throwing out the seeds. The sower is a peasant, in tattered clothes, and he's trusting God with it all.

Johan Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, and other composers have written on their religious compositions the phrase *Soli Deo Gloria*. Sometimes they wouldn't write it out and just abbreviate it "*S.D.G.*" *Soli Deo Gloria*, for God alone be the Glory. To God alone be the glory, and it is for him that we live and serve.