

**Not in Vain**  
**I Corinthians 15:58**  
**November 13, 2022**

It happened in 12<sup>th</sup> grade in a math class. My friend, Dale, sat behind me, and another friend, Candy, sat in the row next to me. Dale knew I was a Christian, so before class started, as we sat our desks, he would ask me a question about faith or Jesus or God. You know those questions, the ones no one can answer fully: If God is so loving, why is there suffering in the world? If God knows everything, why pray? If someone doesn't hear about Jesus, are they going to hell?

I would take those questions to my mentor, and he would give me an answer for Dale. At the next class, I gave Dale the answer (with Candy chiming in every once in a while). As soon as I gave him an answer, he was ready with another question. Finally, my mentor said, "Stop trying to answer his questions. He doesn't care about the answers. He is just trying to trick you."

I didn't listen to my mentor and kept trying to answer Dale's questions as best as I could. When we graduated, I lost contact with Candy and Dale. And I wondered if I had any impact on them.

Having said these words, let us turn to our scripture passage for this morning. Before I read, pray with me: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Our scripture passage this morning is one verse (at least for the moment). It is what I call "my life verse" or "my verse for ministry." It is one I have counted on, relied on over and over again in ministry. It keeps me from giving up. Please follow along as I read it: "Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I am going to admit this right now: I made a mistake by picking out only one verse this morning. Look at the verse and note the word “Therefore.” Whenever you see the word “therefore,” you should ask why is the therefore there for. The therefore is referring back to what was said earlier in chapter 15. Our scripture passage for today is the conclusion from what was said earlier. So, technically, we should have read all of chapter 15...which is really long....58 verses. (So be grateful, I am just summarizing it.)

The chapter is about the resurrection. The people of Corinth found it difficult to believe that the dead can really come back to life. They didn’t understand it, so why believe it. If I don’t understand it, how God do it. As a result, many Christians of Corinth began to doubt and even deny the resurrection of Jesus...which is an essential part to our faith.

The Apostle Paul, who is writing this, spends all of chapter 15 arguing and upholding and proving the resurrection. Here is a famous section from the beginning of the chapter: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,<sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup>After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time...and last of all he appeared to me also.”

Paul goes on to say if we do not believe this, the resurrection, then our faith is in vain, our faith is futile, our faith is useless. We would still be in our sins. We would be lost and pitied. Look at all trials I have gone through, Paul says, in my witness for Christ. They are for nothing if there is no resurrection.

However, Paul says, the resurrection of Christ did happen because I am witness. Therefore, since Jesus Christ lives, our faith is full of great value. Because Christ lives, Jesus brings us life, and life abundant. Because Christ lives, we too will live, beginning now and into eternity.

So come back to your senses, Paul says! Jesus has conquered death! He has the victory over it. And Paul writes loudly, thanks be to God!

Therefore because of all this, because of the certainty of the Resurrection, because Jesus’ death was not in vain, be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord, because your toil in the Lord is never in vain.

In the book of Galatians, it says, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9) Be steadfast.

Do not move from your faith. Over and over in the scriptures, it encourages us to stand firm and keep the faith. Be immovable.

“We were created for good works,” it says in Ephesians. “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). Abound in the work of the Lord.

For when you do, Jesus said, it gives glory to God. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16)

This coming week in the class *The Book*, we look at the life of Solomon: gifted, wise, rich, famous, yet he wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes such things as: all my wisdom is meaningless. All my wealth is meaningless. My life is just chasing after the wind. All is vanity. Futile.

We do not have to feel like Solomon. We have this promise that what we do for God is not in vain. It is not in vain because God richly rewards our labor in the Lord. As Paul nears the end of his earthly life, he writes in another letter, “I have fought the good fight (I have abounded in the work of the Lord), I have finished the race (I have been steadfast), I have kept the faith (I’ve been immovable). Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord...will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Our labor in the Lord is not in vain because it bears much fruit. Therefore, I bring us back to the work of the Deacons (since it is Deacon Sunday), much of it hidden, invisible, unnoticed, taken for granted. Yet, if there were no Deacons in this church, no one would greet you at the door.

If there were no Deacons, no one would give you a bulletin.

If there were no Deacons, no one would collect the offering.

If there were no Deacons, there would be no coffee or cookies after worship.

If there were no Deacons, you would have no communion.

If there were no Deacons, there would be no owl express.

If there were no Deacons, who would notice those in care facilities?

If there were no Deacons, no one would send out care cards or flowers.

If there were no Deacons, no one from the church would call you on your birthday.

If there were no Deacons, there would be no prayer team.

If there were no Deacons, there would be no prayer shawls or prayer bears.

If there were no Deacons, there would be no grief ministry.

I think you get the idea.

All those helping out in the worship today are Deacons. I know there are many more of you out in the congregation. Will you stand? Whether you are currently serving on the Board of Deacons, or you have in the past, or you have been a Deacon in another church? Please stand so we can finally recognize you. Thank you.

The Deacons is a serving ministry. Often unnoticed. Rarely glorified or heralded or recognized. But it is a ministry that God sees, recognizes and upholds. Their work is not in vain because it is done for God.

Back to the story of Dale and Candy, my high school friends in that math class. I went back for my 5-year high school class reunion. And there was Dale. After we greeted each other with a hug, he said, "Do you remember that math class when I tried to stump you with all those questions about God? Well, after we graduated, I couldn't get your answers out of my head, and I decided to believe. I became a Christian."

Fast toward another five years. It is now 10 years after high school. I was at a hotel for a conference that trained people on how to lead Bible studies. As I waited for the elevator to take me to my room, the elevator door opened, and standing there was Candy, the girl who sat across from me in the math class.

Our mouths fell open in total shock and I blurted out, "What are you doing here?" She pulled me into the elevator and said, "Do you remember that math class when Dale was asking you all those questions about God? I was listening to all your answers. One day, I went home after school, and said to God, 'I want what Diane has.' There on an end table in my living room was a little booklet about God. I read it, and dedicated my life to Jesus."

She continued: "Just before the elevator doors opened, I was telling my friend I wish I could meet again the person who was instrumental in my coming to faith. At that moment, the elevator door opened and there you were."

You never know what God is going to do with your words or your service for God. What you do for God, whether spoken or serving, whether word or deed it is not in vain. As you prepare communion elements, imagine what God can do to the heart who tastes that bread and juice. Imagine what a smile from an usher or greeter can do to a heart that is lonely or grieving.

I don't know how many times I have visited someone in the hospital or in their home, and they point out the flowers sent by the deacons. The other day I visited someone in their home, and draped over their bed was a prayer shawl. The spouse pointed to the shawl and said, "We have not been forgotten."

Will you join the Deacons in their work for God? They can use many more hands. They have a table in the Fellowship Hall, and you can speak to the Deacons to find out how you can join in their work for God.

All of you here, most of the time you will not know or see what your work for God does for a person. But we have this promise, right here in front of us, that whatever we do for God is never, never in vain. And perhaps when we join our brothers and sisters in heaven, we will spend all of eternity finding out what our work and words have done.

Amen and amen.

Let us stand and firm together what we believe by saying the Apostle's Creed.