

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in your hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

I was five years old the first time my mom took our family to family camp at Lutheridge. I know I was young, but what I seem to remember most, besides the fact that we got to sleep in a room with three beds in it, was the counselors. I remember them always seeming happy; laughing, joking, singing. And I remember thinking even at the young age of five years old that I wanted to be just like them when I grew up; carefree and spending my entire summer in the woods swimming and doing crafts and having messy relays. Well fast forward fifteen years or so and it was finally my turn to take my place as a counselor up on the mountain.

In the years between my first trip to camp and the day I officially became a counselor on the ridge I attended summer camp every year. So I was prepared for the nature hikes, swimming in the pool and the lake, canoeing, leading bible study, making keychains out of gimp, the relationships I'd make with others on staff. BUT what I was not prepared for is how BORING the evenings would be. After the campers went to bed the staff had their free time. It was two hours of doing anything we wanted as long as it didn't involve tobacco, alcohol, or inappropriate relations. BUT there were no video games, no televisions, no cell phones and we couldn't text at that point anyway, and you couldn't leave camp. So when you have none of the comforts of the modern world what do you do? Puzzles. You do puzzles.

In the staff lounge we spent hours during the summer putting together thousand piece puzzles. We pieced together ones with cars, nature scenes, cartoon characters, but the hardest one by far was the puzzle we put together of a set of kittens. All of their fur looked the same. We started this puzzle in the beginning of June after staff training was over and the first week in August, the week before the last week of camp, we were still working. In fact, we set up a

second puzzle table because that one just seemed to be so difficult. But with two nights to spare we finally finished...all but ONE piece. We looked everywhere for that piece to the puzzle. We looked in the trash, under the furniture, in the furniture, in the snack cabinet, EVERYWHERE you could think of and still there was one piece missing. We were so very frustrated, but were forced to leave the mountain for a final time with a puzzle that was not complete.

I think the body of Christ, even this congregation, is similar to the puzzle that we left unfinished at camp. Each of us has something special to offer our congregation and our community. You know what I'm talking about, the gifts and talents that God has given to us share so that we can build up the body of Christ and be the best person that we can be. Sometimes putting those gifts and talents together is similar to a giant puzzle. You have to think about each person, what they have to offer, who is in need of their gifts, and how those gifts can best fit together to serve Salem and the people of Lititz. AND without everyone here working together and sharing in those gifts, the puzzle, the body of Christ is not complete. We are missing the final piece to the puzzle.

As we celebrate today, a congregational day of thanks-giving, I want you to know that I am grateful to those of you who so willingly share your gifts with others. This congregation runs better because of you, because of your generosity. I see you who clean the church for free, giving of your time at home to be here and make our building better while saving us money. I see you who give generously and tirelessly to the Food Bank and the Little Free Pantry, feeding those who desperately need a meal in our community. I see those of you who assist with our property, fixing things, helping with maintenance, doing endless yard work. I see you who teach and lead committees, who take time out of your busy schedules to prepare lessons and then commit to being here and sharing God's word. I see you who help with altar guild, who come in when no

one is watching and change the paraments for the correct liturgical season, who order bread and pick it up, who clean up after communion, who make sure our services run smoothly. I see you who count money, who pay attention to detail and make sure we have our statements of giving. I see those of you who help with our service, who are readers, acolytes, ushers, communion assistants, those who ring the bell, those who jump in at the last minute. I see you who fill the kids bags for Sunday morning and those who staple bulletins, those who serve on committees and church council. I see you who sit with our shut-ins, who help with funeral meals, who help with the upkeep of our cemetery. I see those of you who pray for me, for us, for Salem. You all share so much; you give so endlessly. And I want you to know that what you do is vital to God's ministry. I couldn't do it without you. We make a great team, when we are all working together to try and accomplish God's mission, when we are building up the body of Christ.

I know that our work may seem endless. I know that at times you may get burnt out and wonder why other people won't step up. I know you wonder if what you do here really matters or if it's worth your time, energy, and brain power. I know sometimes you wonder if our work will ever end, or if you could just simply pull the covers over your head on a Sunday morning and stay tucked safely in bed. The answer to the last question is yes, it's okay to take a break every once in a while. But the answer to the first question is that our work will never be finished until the day that Jesus comes. There is always someone hungry, someone hurting, someone who doesn't have enough, someone who is lonely, someone who needs you and the gifts God has blessed you with. I know it's exhausting. But today, and every day really, I want you to know that what you do does make a difference to me and our church family. It doesn't matter whether your gift is big or your gift is small it makes a difference. YOU help to complete our puzzle. AND even more importantly what you do makes a difference to God, that you would choose to

put him and his work first. It makes him happy. It makes him proud. And why we do what we do even when we are exhausted and feel like we have nothing left to give is simple; the reason we do what we do is because of Jesus, because of what he has already done for us.

Today in our reading in Thessalonians says, “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” God has given us the greatest gift there is, his only son dying for the sake of you, his beloved children. And because we have that gift we know that what really matters is people, not things. So today I invite you, as Paul invited the church in Thessalonica, encourage one another and build one another up. The body of Christ is only as strong as its members. Take time to be in relationship. Take time to tell each other that what the other is doing matters. Share the gifts, the first fruits, that God has given to you with others for their betterment. Celebrate Thanksgiving, not just this week on Thursday with your family, but every day.

My dad always said you never know when tomorrow will be no more. So don't waste your gifts. Share them generously and abundantly as God has given them to you. Build one another up, don't tear each other down. Focus on the positive and be grateful for the many, many gifts that surround you, remembering from where they come. Amen. Thanks be to God.