

Some of you know that outside of my role at Christ Church, I work full-time as a writer for a large not-for-profit company that delivers technology innovations that serve the public good: projects that span safer air travel, more-equitable healthcare, national security, and more. It's a good mission, one I was drawn to as a military veteran—looking for the opportunity to continue serving my country. But it's also hard work: Given our support for the public domain, we often run like a quasi-government agency, with all the frustrating bureaucracy that comes with it. The past two years, we've had a lot of turnover. Many of us have grown weary.

A few weeks ago, my department had an off-site event. It centered the Clifton Strengths assessment, which measures employee talents. Besides workshopping our assessment results, the off-site came complete with motivational music—think “Rocky’s Eye of the Tiger,” really good food—I mean executive-quality, like adobe shrimp salad—and quality time with colleagues. The event aimed to collectively acknowledge our challenges while taking time to recharge, refresh, and explore how our strengths mesh with our teammates.

The event involved a lot of exercises and sharing in front of the large group—about 60 of us in total. Even as I took away useful soundbites, my introvert self found many of these activities painful. Our facilitator Amy, a perky, bubbly extrovert, shared her top Clifton strength: “Woo,” which stands for “Winning Others Over.” She explained it means that she yearns for people to like her.

I ran into Amy on a break midway through the first day, and she asked, “Are you having fun?” I thought for about a second about giving her the response I knew she wanted.

But after a moment I replied, “Do you want my honest answer?”

I went on to explain that while I found the experience interesting, I would not describe it as “fun.” Amy did not know me, but as I am neither perky nor bubbly, those of you who *do* know me should not be surprised by that response.

But in all that forced sharing and vulnerability, one of the big takeaways for me was a shared sentiment articulated best by someone who’d been at the company 30 years. She spoke to why—despite the challenges—she’s stayed all this time, saying, “I came for the mission; I stay for the people.”

It occurred to me that challenges of work and career are not unlike challenges in our faith lives. Just as we can get frustrated with our jobs, we can grow frustrated in ministry. We can become complacent. Idle. Prone to distraction. Some of us find the job too exasperating, and we quietly resign, the new catch phrase for doing just the bare minimum. Or we actually resign, moving from company to company, in this case church to church, always looking for that perfect fit.

And like many companies today, the Church suffers both a talent acquisition crisis and a retention crisis. The diocesan convention this weekend reported that as of this past September, there were 177 churches looking for a part-time priest and 104 looking for a full-time priest—and only 26 priests discerning a call to a new parish. I also heard familiar comments about the difficulties of sustaining church ministry—the challenge of the same 20% of the people doing 80% of the work.

It’s not a crisis new to our times. Paul lamented it throughout the Epistles, as time and again he exhorted various communities to avoid distractions, guard against becoming idle, endure through hardships, keep working for the Gospel.

Jesus addressed this call to mission repeatedly in his teachings and in The Great Commission to his disciples: to pray, heal, feed, preach, teach, baptize in his name.

Imagine, though, if today's scripture were a job posting. The title might read: "Wanted: Disciple of Christ."

This particular posting might describe the work environment and give a clue about the expected work ethic: no tolerance for slackers, no gossiping at the water cooler.

Not too bad so far, right?

But it gets a bit dicey when it starts describing the corporate culture: filled with wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues.

Oh, and let's not forget the specific work requirements: must be willing to risk being arrested, persecuted, betrayed, killed.

If you were a candidate, what would make you take this job? And if you took the job, what would make you stay?

Surely not the salary. Or the guaranteed benefits.

So, what threads of The Good News can we pull from today's readings?

Luke gives us two lines this morning about our assured salvation: not a hair on our head will perish; through endurance we will gain our souls. Malachi tells us, "But for you who reverence my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." Psalm 98 assures us that "In righteousness shall he judge the world and the peoples with equity."

And certainly, beyond those narrow examples, we know the entirety of scripture points to the Good News of Jesus and God's redemptive plan for all of creation. We understand scripture holistically and contextually. There is more than just this.

But still, hearing today's Gospel and living in our current world reality, we might tend to fixate on Luke's depressing apocalyptic imagery—and the daily hardships and injustices we see happening around us.

If all we had to go on was today's scripture, would you take the job?

Last weekend we celebrated Pledge Sunday. We spent the month of October prayerfully discerning what we should give to the church. We had guest preachers speak to this. We added special text to our prayers of the people. We heard stewardship testimonials from parishioners about what Christ Church means to them. Having served in various stewardship roles over the years, I want to thank our Stewardship Committee for their dedicated efforts.

I would like to suggest, though, that rather than being a once-a-year event, every day is Pledge Sunday. Every day is pledge Sunday. Every day is an opportunity to renew our commitment to our mission as disciples, to give to the life of our church.

Because here's the other good news: Discipleship isn't all give, give, give.

In giving, we are richly blessed by serving others and by working alongside others. The work becomes not a sacrifice but a mutual sharing of our gifts, connected to each other in relational ministry. In our giving, we are transformed.

Bishop Ihloff spoke to this yesterday at convention, saying, “Ministry is always a two-way street. We go off to minister, and find our own needs being ministered to.”

That reality was abundantly clear to me about a month ago, when I got a call from someone named Anju Bhargava. Anju had seen my NextDoor posting about the interfaith prayer vigil we’re having tonight. She introduced herself as the founder of the American Hindu Seva Communities and a former interfaith advisor to President Obama who has lived in Howard County the past seven years. She saw we planned to have Christian, Muslim, Quaker, and Jewish traditions in our prayer vigil. She wondered: Did we want to add a Hindu component? Did we want to explore other ideas for interfaith collaboration? Would we like to draw on her experience hosting interfaith education sessions? Yes, yes, and yes. What an opportunity for mutual blessing and for transformation.

Here at Christ Church, I see people blessed by their ministries every day, in ways big and small. There are those who come together each month to deliver meals to the underserved in our community. There are those who collaborate to plan our adult formation opportunities. Those who bring communion to people who are homebound. How about the people sitting in our choir loft every Sunday? I could go on and on.

And in all this, the job, as it were, is filled with untold benefits. Possibilities for opening ourselves to growing evermore Christlike with each interaction with fellow parishioners and community members, with each moment of fellowship and formation, with each week of coming together to the table.

Every Sunday's bulletin is filled with potential opportunity for transformation. We need people: to serve on altar guild, to teach Sunday school, to help with pastoral care, to help with formation, for efforts around racial reconciliation, for mission trips to rebuild homes in places like Puerto Rico, and much, much more.

If we don't have a ministry effort going around the things that interest you, I'm willing to bet there are like-minded people who'd be open to beginning that conversation. Because in this job, while we all have one mission, the exact description of duties varies from person to person. Opportunities abound for us to match our talents to the needs around us.

I would also suggest that just as we consider the question of how we can use our strengths to uphold the life of the church, we should also ask, are those of us in ministry making space for others? Are we acting with intentionality to invite and welcome others to serve alongside us? Do we consider new ideas? Do we truly listen to those different than us—all working together as the Body of Christ, all bearing unique, equally valuable gifts.

As we minister, we grow as individuals, we grow as a faith community, and we grow as the Universal Church called to help carry out God's plan for reconciliation and redemption.

Yes, we all deal with different personal challenges and demands on our time. But within the context of our circumstances and abilities, both Paul and Luke exhort us with a sense of urgency to consider these questions *now*, for we do not know when the hour of judgment will come.

They exhort us to examine what's essential and what isn't. Where our priorities lie. In the world, or in God's mission of radical hospitality and inclusive love: love of God, of neighbor, even of our enemies.

Just as in Jesus's and Paul's time on earth, we are living in distressing times. Today's Scripture appeals to us to sharpen our focus on the mission—and when those dark, apocalyptic images bear down on us, to turn to each other, link arms, and slog through the muck together. To come for the mission, stay for the people.

Where do your strengths and talents lie? How are you using them to give to the life of the Church? I challenge us as individuals and as a faith community to look at our priorities, to look to each other when times get tough, to take ownership in our roles as disciples. “Wanted: Disciples of Christ.” Will you take the job?