

“The Right People at the Right Time”

**A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
The Congregation of St. John’s United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania**

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The following story is from a survivor of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York City. It was written by a woman named Genelle, who had worked on the 64th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. She was the last person to be pulled from the rubble; some 27 hours after the towers fell.

I lay there trapped in the dark after the building collapsed, rethinking my life. I ended up doing what my mom would have done. I prayed. Well, it was more like pleading, screaming, promising, asking for some sort of miracle until I pushed my hand through a few inches of rubble above my head and felt someone’s warm hand close around mine. Then I heard a male voice say the four sweetest words I have ever heard: “I’ve got you, Genelle.”

I clung as much to his reassuring voice as to his strong hand. “My name is Paul,” he said. “You’re going to be okay. They’re going to get you out soon.” The ach in my right leg, the throbbing in my head, faded as I held his hand and listened. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” Paul said. “They’re almost here. Hang on.”

Finally I saw a glimmer of light and heard other voices and distant sirens. Two volunteers from Massachusetts, Brian Buchanan and Rick Cushman, found me with the help of a police officer from Canada named James Symington and his search-and-rescue dog Trakr.

“They’re here,” Paul said. “You’re in good hands now. I’m going to go and let them do their jobs and get you out.”

I never felt him release me, but soon I was holding someone else’s hand—a firefighter’s—and talking to my rescuers as they painstakingly removed twisted steel and chunks of concrete from around me and lifted me out. Hundreds of helpers handed me down the pile of rubble to an ambulance. I heard them cheering, and I kept saying Paul’s name to myself so I wouldn’t forget. I wanted to make sure I thanked him. There were three things I promised God I would do as soon as I got out of the hospital: get baptized, marry my boyfriend Roger and find Paul.

On November 7, after six weeks in the hospital, four surgeries and hours of physical therapy and rehabilitation, I kept the first two promises. Roger and I got married at City Hall in Manhattan that very morning and I was baptized at the Brooklyn Tabernacle.

But Paul? I never found him. Paul’s identity remains a mystery. Somehow Paul had known my name before I even said a word. Who was he?¹

What do you think? Was Paul a modest Good Samaritan? Could he have been a figment of Genelle’s imagination fueled by her desperate situation? Perhaps, as Genelle’s pastor later suggested, Paul was an angel.² I suspect we will never know the identity of Paul. But, there is one thing we can all agree upon. Paul was called by God to a specific purpose. He was the right person at the right time.

Like the mysterious Paul of Genelle’s story, all of you have been given a charge by God. It could be something you never imagined. It might even be unsettling. The God-inspired work before each and every one of you is to take St. John’s into a new and exciting future dedicated to revealing

¹ Excerpted from the article, “Angel at Ground Zero,” by Genelle Guzman-McMillian, which appeared on pages 50-52 of the September 2011 issue of *Guideposts* magazine.

² Ibid.

the Holy One's realm in the Lewisburg area and beyond. Our Divine Parent knows that you are the right people at the right time. You will succeed. Of this, I am absolutely certain. How can I be so sure? There are two reasons. One, each of you is a Christian. Two, this congregation holds a very valuable treasure.

We become Christians through the acts of baptism and confirmation. Baptism helps to prepare us to seek out God and grow into relationship with our Creator and Sustainer. Confirmation provides us with the teaching we need to be faithful to God through the example of Jesus. When we complete confirmation, we pledge before God and other believers to answer the Holy One's call to serve all people in whatever way we are able.³

What motivates us to follow this life path? It is God at work within each of us, something that brought you here to this church and at this time. You are not here by accident. The truth is that God has summoned each of you, through your decision to become a Christian, to assist in the rebirth of St. John's and to help transform the world. God stands with you and has complete confidence that you will be successful in the task the Holy One has placed before you. And if you doubt, just remember: God doesn't make mistakes!

The other reason I mentioned is the wealth this congregation has. I don't mean the beautiful sanctuary, well designed facility, bequests and endowment, or the like. What kind of treasure am I talking about? It is the hopeful determination and the blessings that each of you possesses. I can sense strongly in all of you a desire to see this church continue into the future. It is true that this congregation has recently experienced some rough times, as well as the loss of people and material resources. Yet, you are not willing to see the final chapter of this faith community's story written.

Something else I also recognize is the talent present among you. There are those of you that the Holy One has gifted for the tasks of administration, art and music, congregational care, facility upkeep, fellowship, mission, spiritual growth, stewardship, teaching, and worship planning. In short, the active membership of St. John's has every skill needed to make this congregation a potent representation of God's kingdom in the surrounding communities. You are rich beyond measure. What's more, you are willing to share your blessings with others.

God has chosen each of you for sacred work and gifted you for that effort with hopeful determination and spiritual gifts. You are the right people at the right time for building up this church. All that is needed for success is a little guidance, encouragement, and the opportunity for your talents to come forth. Still, there is hesitation on the part of some members to engage in certain kinds of work on behalf of the church, such as joining important committees and giving them new life. Why is that?

If we think about congregations in general, three particular kinds of reasons are usually given in regards to people not providing more of their time and talents to their faith communities. The first involves some sense of inadequacy on the part of otherwise skilled congregants. Church members may cite age, inexperience, infrequent church attendance, or a disability among others. Clearly, Moses did most of those things when God came to him with an important task. Moses sought to avoid God's call due to lack of social status, ignorance about God, low self-esteem, and a speech impediment, as we heard in our earlier readings from Exodus 3 and 4. However, God asked Moses to trust and used him with all his faults to accomplish great acts of liberation and hope.

Another excuse sometimes offered concerns a lack of opportunity to make use of spiritual gifts for the good of a church. This can arise when congregations offer few activities outside of Sunday morning worship or Sunday school. But more often than not, this situation actually comes from the perception that certain church members are solely responsible for particular jobs, whether they know it or not. Some are also viewed as uncompromising authorities on how certain tasks must be done. In cases like these, flexibility on the part of everyone is the solution. Membership in a church is about acceptance of each other, cooperation, and sharing, not about competition and status.

³ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, "Calling All Believers: Celebrating the Gifts of Baptismal Ministry," *Congregations* 30, no. 4 (2004):14-17.

It is true that some ways of doing things in churches are based on time-tested, practical wisdom. But, there is always room for trying something different. Failure to understand that can lead to behaviors that turn people away who might otherwise help around the church. It also stifles innovation that could just be the thing needed to revitalize some aspect of congregational life. As members of a faith community, we must be sensitive to how our own words and actions may stand in the way of a congregant's contribution to the church. If we do this, then this barrier to member involvement can be reduced.

Finally, some congregants do not come forward to help with some tasks simply because they innately know there is a mismatch between their gifts and the work at hand. In addition, church activities may take place when those individuals cannot come due to work or other commitments. This may be frustrating to some when it seems like they are always the ones doing certain projects. They wonder, "Why aren't more of the others participating?" The reality is that we just need to accept that each person has different abilities, preferences, and availability. We may have to adjust our ways of doing things and when we do them. By experimenting with this, we may create opportunities for greater member involvement in the work of the church.

Additionally, faith communities can do one other thing to improve member participation. Rather than defining the worth of congregants in terms of program or project participation, churches can view the expression of love and caring for others that their members do every day of the week, as mission work and involvement in the life of those faith communities.⁴ Such efforts include providing transportation, food, and clothing for another, along with the gifts of cards, phone calls, and visits that demonstrate compassionate concern. If you think about it, every one of you who does these things is involved in holy work!

We need to diligently strive to foster an atmosphere here at St. John's that encourages each member to see him or herself as the right person at the right time, and to believe it. We must assist each member to give fully of his or her spiritual gifts for the benefit of the congregation and the community. If we do, then God will bless us even more. That is the lesson of Jesus' Parable of Entrusted Money in Matthew 25. We need to risk ourselves and the talents God has bestowed on each of us. If we don't, we take a chance on losing them and the benefits they can provide.

All of us have something to give, even if the best we can realistically manage is being in church on Sunday morning. Indeed, by being present, each of you adds a vital element to the life of St. John's by spoken words, singing, expressions of gratitude, community building through the Passing of the Peace, donations, and the lifting up of prayer concerns. These are of great value and should also be celebrated.

You are the right people at the right time for leading St. John's into a bright future. You are the right people at the right time to rescue some of the many individuals in the world buried under the rubble of collapsed hopes and dreams, who are hoping and praying, perhaps even screaming, that God will send someone to help.

God believes in this church and each of you. God has blessed this congregation and each of you with great gifts. God trusts that you will take up the challenge and put them to use for the future of St. John's. How will you respond to the gifts God has given you and the great faith the Holy One has placed in you?

⁴ A. Wayne Schwab, "Re-Centering Congregational Life Around Member's Daily Missions," *Congregations* 32, no. 2 (2006):34-37.