



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start # 2330

Romans 16:1-2 "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many and of myself as well."

There he was the other day as I pulled into the church parking lot. He was busy planting flowers out by the church sign. His hands were dirty, he had a bag of soil opened and several flowers were already planted. I walked over to speak to him. He's one of our members. He does this every year. Few know about it, but in a month we will enjoy the benefits of his labor. I've known about this for a long time. He reminded me that his name is anonymous. He wants no shout out for the pulpit. He doesn't want his name in the bulletin. He's not a deacon. I've not known him to teach any Bible classes. But this is something that he could do and he does. No one assigns him this job. He donates all the costs. It's his way of simply helping out.

And, that brings us to our verse today. Sister Phoebe of the Cenchrea church was like that. She helped. She helped the church. She helped Paul. She helped many. Now about the only time you hear about Phoebe these days is when someone gets a wild hair and uses her as an example of female deacons. Deaconess, is what some like to label Phoebe with. Paul calls her a servant. The word servant is where we get our term deacon. It is assumed therefore that all servants are deacons. Folks who like this want to find a way to have women behind the pulpit, and in the leadership of being an elder. And, in all of this, they simply miss the sweet and wonderful spirit of sister Phoebe.

Do all servants have to be deacons? Deacons in the sense of what we find in Timothy? Qualified and appointed by the church? Paul would have a hard time fitting the description since he was single. Yet, many times he refers to himself as a servant or a bond-servant. What about Jesus? He was a servant. He came to serve and not be served. Was Jesus a deacon like we have in the churches today? Is it possible to simply help out and serve without having a title and a position? Can a person, like my Mr. Anonymous, simply plant flowers without having to have a title? Can a single person be a servant? Can a widow be a servant? Phoebe served. Don't read into that a deaconess. You discredit her kind spirit when you do that.

Phoebe helped. Now, she needed help. Here are some thoughts:

(OVER)

First, to be a helper like Phoebe and my Mr. Anonymous, a person must have open eyes and a willing heart. On any given Sunday our parking lot is stuffed full of cars. There is only one way in and the same way out. Everyone who drives in passes the church sign. Everyone that leaves, passes the church sign. We all see it, but Mr. Anonymous, really saw it. Some nice flowers sure adds a touch. It shows beauty. It shows that we are taking care of the place. It doesn't take much to do that, but the rest of us always seem to be in a hurry to get there and a hurry to get somewhere else when worship is over. He notices. He's taken it upon himself to take care of that one little spot and he does it well.

Now this is much more than planting flowers out by the church sign. It's about recognizing how to make things better. There are physical things, such as picking up paper on the floor, putting a paper towel in the trash that someone missed. It's about leaving your pew nice and clean, even when you've had the little ones with you.

But, it's even more than just the physical things. It's seeing someone sitting alone and asking if you could sit with them. It's seeing someone who seems a bit down and asking if you could talk to them. It's giving one of the elders a pat on the back and a big "thank you" for all that they do. It's sharing a sermon CD with someone. It's mailing some material overseas to help a small church. It's taking a young preacher and his family out to eat and making sure that they get dessert. It's getting down to the church building early to help pass out things. It's sweeping off the steps to make them safe, clean and inviting. It's seeing something and rather than complain about it, doing something to make it better.

Second, there comes when helpers need help themselves. This is important. This is hard for many of us. I know, I'm near the top of the list on this. I'd as soon do things myself as to ask anyone for help. I know what I want done and I know the way that I want it done. And, the time it takes to explain that to someone else, I could already have things done. But, let's face it, we all need each other and we all need help. There are days when we visit someone in the hospital. And, there are days when we are the one in the hospital. I love helping others. It never bothers me. It bothers me for others to help me. It makes me feel guilty. I feel that I ought to be able to do things. But, I'm learning. Our Jump Starts have really helped me with this. I have someone who takes care of all my mailings now. She makes all the books and she keeps them stocked and supplied. She has found fast and efficient ways of making this faster than I ever did. I used to hand fold and hand staple every Jump Start book. Took all day to do that. Not now. Now, my fingers do not even touch it. It was hard to let go of this. These Jump Starts have been like a child to me. I've fussed over them, babied them and got them to where I want them to be. Prying my fingers off of them and letting someone else take over the production and mailing was hard. But like Phoebe, I needed some help. This has gotten too large for me to keep up with.

There is no shame in asking for help. No one of us can do it all. In too many congregations today, elders want absolute control of the whole place, down to cutting the yard, mailing flyers, paying bills and cleaning the building. There's no need for that. If they were doing their jobs as shepherds they wouldn't have time for those other things. Let others help. Mr. Anonymous, for me, takes pride in that this is something that he can do. We preachers can learn a lot from Phoebe. Most of us are pretty good at helping and being servants. But allowing others to help us is hard. We need to do that. There are folks all around us in the congregation that understand things better than we do. Use them. Include them. Invite them. Ask them.

Third, the church works like a team. Phoebe helped. Now, help Phoebe. In baseball, you have the manager, the trainers, the players, the equipment guys, the guys that take care of the field, and even a bat boy. I suppose you could have one of those million dollar players pulling the tarp off the field each day, but his talents are better used in playing the game. This concept is true in the church. You could have one person just about do it all, and in some small places, it often comes down to that, but the more that have a job, the more that feel that they have a sense of pride and ownership in the place. Mr. Anonymous, can say to himself, 'This church needs me, because I help make the grounds look good.' Now, the flowers he plants won't take anyone to Heaven, but as folks drive up and down that street and see those flowers, they may think about the beauty of God. What a different

impression that would be if there were only dead flowers, trash all over the yard and a look like the place is condemned. No one would want to visit.

Team work takes place when each person contributes his abilities and energies to make things better. Team work is not about the individual. Team work is not about competition. Team work is about the team. And, it takes a team. The preacher preaches, but he needs people to run the mics, make the recordings and have the building comfortable and presentable for folks to assemble.

Phoebe helped and now Phoebe could use some help. That needs to be our story. We help and there are times when we need help. We are all in this together. We encourage. We teach. We influence. We help. And, together, we make the place better and we make the people better.

Let us leave this place better than we found it...

Thanks, Mr. Anonymous. You make a difference more than you realize!

Roger Shouse (Used by permission)
