

**The Disciple's Path:
Gotta Serve Somebody**

I Peter 4:8-11

Faith at all is faith in action.

A sermon preached by
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Fort Smith, Arkansas
February 17, 2019

I got word from our mission team in Guatemala that they all arrived safely yesterday and are preparing today for their trip into the rural areas of Guatemala to do their medical and dental work this week. We are proud of their commitment to serve and the time, energy and money that it takes to put together a trip like this. They get so much support from this congregation, both financial and spiritual, and it is appreciated.

Of course, those 16 people are not the only ones who serve around here. We have dozens if not hundreds of folks who give time, money, and energy to Christian service, lots of people making a difference for the Kingdom. Except for our mission trips—adults and youth—most of our service is done locally. Some of it happens inside the church; we have people rocking babies, teaching Sunday School, guiding the youth, playing in the band, singing in the choir, feeding folks at funerals, visiting the sick. But much of our service happens outside of the church; virtually every non-profit in Fort Smith has a First United Methodist member pitching in somehow—knitting mats for our school kids, making sandwiches for the homeless, filling backpacks for kids on the weekend, providing food for the hungry—many needs are met by people serving God.

In fact, I don't know what God would do without us. That may sound shocking or arrogant at first, but it's true. Since the ascension of Jesus into heaven, God has needed physical hands, feet, eyes, and ears to do God's spiritual work in the world. Jim Harnish, who wrote the book called *A Disciple's Path*, that we have been using for this series, wrote about "this shocking affirmation of Scripture: the infinite, almighty God chooses to accomplish the transformation of the world by working in and through the lives of ordinary people who become agents of God's love."¹ Yeah, God could fix the world. God is powerful enough to do that. But God chooses instead to use the people God created to do the work of transformation.

St. Teresa of Avila, a mystic in the 16th century, put it this way:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth,
yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good,
and yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now.²

We are the hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth of God to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

So the idea of serving God is probably not new to you. In fact, when we make the vow of membership to uphold the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, “service” may be the easiest one to affirm. Methodists are pretty active people; we like to stay busy. But let’s drill down into this idea of service today. What does it really mean? What does it take? What good does it do? There are many Scriptures to help us in the quest, but we will pick (or I picked for you) this text from I Peter.

The first thing our Scripture tells us is that service is based in love. Service is an expression of faith in response to the unconditional, abundant, eternal love of God in Jesus Christ: “*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins (theirs and ours). Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*”³ Love is the foundation, the motivation, the incentive for Christian service.

I had the opportunity to read I Corinthians 13 again devotionally this week. What incredible words those are, and what an incredible life they describe: “*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. ...now faith, hope, and love abide—these three. But the greatest of these is love.*”⁴ Indeed. Any argument there?

When our lives are founded, grounded and characterized by love, then we can welcome everyone toward God. We can “reach out in concern and service to the world,” as we say at our weddings.⁵ The love of God compels us to serve.

Bill Wilson founded Metro Ministries in a very rough part New York City in 1980. He has been shot, stabbed, and had a member of his staff murdered. Yet his church has an extensive bus ministry to bring kids to Sunday School—thousands every week. There was a Puerto Rican lady who had come to know Christ in a church service, and she approached Bill Wilson to ask how she could work in the church. She had to speak through an interpreter because she could hardly speak any English. Bill didn’t know how to use her, but she was insistent, so he finally said, “OK, I’ll put you on a bus. Ride a different bus every week and just love the kids.”

So every week this Puerto Rican lady would board a bus, find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put the child on her lap, and whisper throughout the ride the only words she had learned in English: “I love you. Jesus loves you.”

After a few months, the lady became attached to a particular kid on one of the buses, and she asked to stay on that bus. This little boy didn't speak. He came to Sunday School every week with his sister, and he sat on the woman's lap, but he never uttered a sound. She, however, never let up with her talking, telling him over and over again, "I love you. Jesus loves you." One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered out, "I love you, too." Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. Love had finally broken through.

That was about 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon. About 6:30 that evening, New York City police were called to an alley where the little boy's body had been found. His mother, a drug addict, had beaten him to death and thrown him off a fire escape.

Without a doubt, some of the last words this little boy heard were, "I love you, and Jesus loves you" because a Puerto Rican disciple of Jesus who couldn't even speak English had offered herself in God's service.⁶

We are all called to serve. We are all ministers in some capacity. The Christian faith is not only a thought; it's an activity. The Letter of James says, *"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."*⁷

So be doers of the word. Volunteer for lots of stuff, right? Not exactly. The word "volunteer" is not in Bible. God doesn't want volunteers. God wants servants.

Now don't get me wrong. We love our volunteers. Sometimes you have to have volunteers. Something is not getting done, and we need somebody to do it. You step up, even if you don't feel called or equipped to teach second grade Sunday School. And we appreciate it. Don't stop volunteering!

But real Christian growth, deep discipleship, happens on a different level. Volunteers serve out of the goodness of their hearts, maybe doing something they are not that thrilled to do. They are helpful at schools, hospitals, civic organizations, political causes, and so forth. But volunteering wears you out.

Christian servanthood looks like volunteering sometimes, but it's fundamentally different. Servanthood is based not on our character, but on the

character of God. Servanthood serves even when it is not convenient. Servants have a passion about their service because they are plugging in to the story of God, the movement of God's love in human history. Servanthood doesn't wear us out; it energizes us. It excites us to be a part of what God is doing.

Jesus gave us the prime example of servanthood in John 13 on his last night with the disciples. As they were preparing to eat, they noticed the homeowner had failed to provide a servant to wash their feet, a basic act of hospitality. So Jesus took off his robe, grabbed a basin and a towel, and he washed their feet. The Master washing the feet of his followers! It was unforgettable, to say the least. When Jesus was through, he said, "*You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*"⁸

Servants serve because they have been gifted to do so. Through the Holy Spirit, God gives every believer at least one spiritual gift. There are many. Our Scripture text just mentions two—"Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies."⁹ There are longer lists in Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. Every gift is different, because every servant is different. But each one—gift and servant—is significant. Each one is important. Each one plays a role in bringing the Kingdom on earth. I really don't have time to go into detail on spiritual gifts, but I wish you would, through your own study or through a class here at the church. If you will study spiritual gifts, you will be able to discern how the Holy Spirit has gifted you. If you align your service with your gifts, you will experience joy and effectiveness and fruitfulness in your ministry. Paul talks about spiritual gifts like a body—many parts, all different, all important to the health of the body.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission that landed men on the moon for the first time. There were only three astronauts that went on that mission, but when they returned, astronaut Michael Collins said, "All this is possible only through the blood, sweat, and tears of thousands of people... All you see are the three of us, but underneath the surface are thousands and thousands of others."¹⁰ Catherine Thimmesh, in her book *Team Moon*, says there were 400,000 people involved in the effort to put a man on the moon. There were 17,000 engineers, soldiers, mechanics, and contractors just at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. About 500 people were involved in making

the space suits for the astronauts. It was an incredible team effort. No wonder Neil Armstrong said that when he took his first step on the moon, he thought of the hundreds of thousands of people who had given him the opportunity to take that step.

The purpose of all 400,000 people on *Team Moon* was clear—accomplish the mission. The purpose of every gifted servant who has a function in the Body of Christ is equally clear: “*so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.*”¹¹ Jim Harnish says, “Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our servant-shaped lives become tangible expressions of God’s reign and rule in the present, bearing witness to the way the world will be when God’s kingdom purpose is fully accomplished in the future.”¹²

This desire to be part of the unfolding story of God is deep in our spiritual DNA. It’s part of the image of God that was implanted in you at your creation. It’s what ultimately brought you here today. We want to help. We want to do good. We want to share love. We want to make a difference. Sometimes we get discouraged. Positive change seems so slow. Our problems seem so great. But God is greater! When we give the service we are gifted to give, we will have an impact for the Kingdom. One day that Kingdom will come, and we will be a part of it.

Karen Miller is a leadership coach whose husband was a pastor in a new church plant. So they were trying to develop new leaders in their church. Karen noticed an older woman named Irene, who took great care in setting up the Communion table. She made sure everything was in order, and everyone around her did what Irene told them to do.

Karen asked Irene after church if she thought she might have gifts for leadership. Irene said, “Absolutely not! I am just an ordinary woman, housewife, and mother. I’m not leading; I’m just serving.”

Some months later, the church hosted a church leader from Rwanda. He told how he dreamed of starting an orphanage and school for children whose parents had been slaughtered in the 1994 genocide. The church wanted to help. They decided to raise money with a banquet, and Irene agreed to help organize the affair.

When Irene visited a possible caterer, she somehow convinced the caterer to donate most of the food. Irene talked with a banquet hall, and they gave her a deep discount. An audio-visual company donated their services. Nobody could

tell Irene no. On the banquet night, over 200 people came, and enough money was raised to build the school and its first dormitory.

Afterward, Karen teased Irene about her “lack of leadership,” and even Irene admitted that she felt good in the role. Each May after that, as long as she was able, Irene organized the banquet for the orphanage. The church began to see pictures of kids who had lived on the streets and never brushed their teeth, now with broad, white smiles. Boys who had been malnourished now ran and jumped across the courtyard on strong legs. Girls who had come to the orphanage dressed in rags showed off their neat school uniforms and hair bows.

After Irene died, the orphanage named a new dorm after her. When they dedicated it, they revealed that Irene’s banquet had singlehandedly covered a third of the school’s annual operating costs.¹³ Who knew?

Do you want to share love? Do you want to make a difference? Do you want to have a Kingdom impact in the world? Then “*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ...so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*”¹⁴

¹ James A. Harnish with Justin LaRosa, *A Disciple’s Path: Companion Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 55.

²<http://www.rc.net/southwark/ashfordstteresa.htm>

³ I Peter 4:8.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:4-8, 13.

⁵ *United Methodist Hymnal*, 866.

⁶ Bill Wilson, *Charisma*, October 1996, in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville: Baker). Cf. <https://www.metrochild.org>.

⁷ James 1:22-25.

⁸ John 13:13-15.

⁹ I Peter 4:11.

¹⁰ Catherine Thimmesh. *Team Moon* (HMH Books for Young Readers, 2015), *PreachingToday.com*.

¹¹ I Peter 4:11.

¹² Harnish, 61.

¹³ Karen Miller, "The 3 Secrets of Leadership Training," *CT Pastors, PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁴ I Peter 4:10-11.