

Sermon: Service

1 John 4: 7-12,16

Over the past several weeks, we have been exploring various spiritual practices-ways that we can continue to live and to grow in our walk with God even in a time like this when we may not be able to gather as easily as a church together, or at least not in the ways that we are most accustomed to.

We have talked about the practice of worshipping God and the study of scripture and today, we will look at a third essential practice of the Christian life, the practice of serving.

The words “serve,” “serving,” “service” and “servant” appear over one thousand times in scripture. It would therefore seem to me that the practice of serving others is a particularly God-like way to live and to love. And love is really at the heart of it you see.

When a young man once asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment, Jesus told him that it was to love; not to worship the right way, not to believe the right things, not to carefully refrain from doing the wrong things, though there is certainly nothing wrong with any of that. But Jesus said that the greatest commandment, in other words, the most important thing, is love, love of God and love of neighbor.

But Jesus also made it clear that the love he was talking about was not just some abstract, mamby pamby, theoretical kind of love. No Jesus was talking about the real deal, the all-in, the no holding back kind of love, the kind of love that involves all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.

The central ethic of the Christian faith, it seems, is love. Paul, too, says that the Law, in other words, scripture, is all summed up in the one command to love our neighbor and he tells us that, without love, we are merely like a “clanging gong or a clashing symbol”, just noise.

John, in his first epistle, as we read this morning, goes so far as to say that if we do not love then we don't even know God, we are clueless as to who God really is “for God is love”, John tells us. It's not just that love is one of the things that God does, you see, but love is the essential thing that God IS.

And it seems to me that an important teaching here is that it can be that way with us as well, that even we can, not just do loving things but actually BE love, that we can be love embodied. Just as Christ was the embodiment of God and God is love so also can we be the embodiment of love and therefor the embodiment of Christ in the world around us.

But what does that kind of love look like, on the ground, so to speak? When Jesus washed the dirty, stinky feet of his disciples he told them that he was giving them an example right then and there. He said, "Just as I have done, you also must do". And at another time he told them that "Whoever wished to be great among you" (to be at the top of the class) "must be your servant". And he told them that even he had come, not to be served but to serve.

I don't know about you but when I think of serving in a Christian and especially in a church context, one of the first things that comes to my mind is mission work or mission trips. If you know me well at all then you know that this kind of work has become a significant part of my life and has in truth, fundamentally changed and shaped who I am as a person and certainly as a Christian.

It started for me when I was still in my mid 20s (which was some time ago) when I spent a year volunteering in a small hospital in the mountains of Puerto Rico.

I have also worked in Guatemala, the Amazon region of Peru and since 2003, I have accompanied or led mission teams to the southern state of Chiapas Mexico nearly 20 times now.

Over the years, I have seen mission work done very well- good missiology they call it, and I have also witnessed some things that fully warrant the sometimes bad press and negative criticism that mission trips have at times received- some really bad missiology.

And through these experiences I have learned a thing or two about serving that I think apply, not just in the distant mission field, but wherever we serve, whether it is in the jungles of Peru or the mountains of West Virginia, the homeless shelter in Hickory North Carolina or at the kitchen table of your neighbor just next door.

One of the first things I've learned is that serving is a very special kind of embodied love. It is qualitatively different than merely helping. Helping is almost inevitably based in inequality. When we reach *down* to give someone else a hand *up*, we see ourselves as being in different places and on different levels. Helping not only approaches the other with a different *attitude* than when we are serving, but also from a different *altitude*.

If we are aware and attentive to what is going on inside of us when we are helping, we will likely find that we are almost always helping someone whom we see as weaker than we are, needier than we are. When we refer to people as "less fortunate" or "the least of these",

though well intended, we usually do not include ourselves in that group and we see ourselves as somehow different than them.

But the true servant fully recognizes that we are all in some ways less fortunate and we are all in many ways in need ourselves. Serving is a relationship between equals, one in which if I see anyone as lower than the other, it is how I see myself, as I serve with humility and with gratitude.

Serving is also different than fixing. When we try to fix another person, we perceive them as broken. There is distance between ourselves and whatever or whomever we are fixing. Fixing becomes a form of judgment. When we are fixing, *we* have the solution and *we* know best.

On my first two mission trips to Peru, I traveled with a group from a large and rather wealthy church in the middle part of the state. One of the things that immediately struck me about the group was the large amount of money they brought with them, much more than we needed for our travel and lodging and food.

One of the days that we were in country we visited a group of people who had fled from the violence in the mountains between government and rebel groups at the time. A landowner had platted out plans for a small community spread out over a large open field.

The people were scraping together what they could and buying small plots of land on which to build their tiny bamboo and mud homes. The most expensive land was the higher ground in the center of the field, near where the town plaza would allegedly eventually be built. The further you got from the center, the cheaper and less desirable the land became.

A group of folks in the community had decided that they needed a church and so everyone chipped in what they could and with time they were able to purchase a small plot at the furthest and lowest corner of the field. It was not the most desirable spot, but it was what they could afford, and they looked forward to starting construction of the church when they could scrape together enough to begin.

You could see the pride and satisfaction in their faces as they showed us the place where the church would someday stand and told us of their plans for building it together.

As we listened, or at least some of us did, the leader of our mission team had an idea. (Fixers always have ideas, you see.) He asked the folks to show us where the central plaza was going to be and when we got there he proclaimed, "This is where the church needs to be built!"

The people from the community shifted nervously on their feet and told him that they could not afford to purchase land there. It was far too expensive. "How much would a plot here cost?" he asked them. They told him the price and it was the equivalent of some thousands of dollars US but reasonable by American standards.

Our leader reached into his money belt and started counting out the cash and gave it to the leader of the community to purchase the land for the church. You could see the discomfort and ambivalence on the face of the folks in the community.

Yes, it might be nice to have the church in the center of the village, near the plaza, but the pride and sense of accomplishment and faithfulness they felt when they stood on the humble plot of land they had purchased with their own hard earned money would be lost. Once again, they were told that they were not enough. Once again what they could accomplish was not good enough, not even for God it seemed.

Fixing, like helping is the work of our own ego but service is the work of our soul. They may look similar if you are watching from the outside, but the inner experience is quite different.

Fundamentally, helping, fixing and serving are different ways of seeing others. When we help, we see others as weak (at least weaker than we are), when we fix, we see them as broken while forgetting that we are broken too. When we serve, we see ourselves and others and all of life as sacred and whole.

Serving, like all love, is relational. It recognizes that we are all connected; your suffering becomes my suffering until your joy becomes my joy. When we give of ourselves in service to others, we just may find that we are served in return and it may even be difficult to discern just which one of us is more deeply blessed by it.

There are many ways that we can serve. You don't have to go far. Just as far as the very next person will do. Lord knows we all need love. Its more a matter of having the right heart than it is finding just the right place or doing just the right thing.

We don't always think of serving as a spiritual practice, but it is. As Heather shared with us last Sunday, spiritual practices are places where we are present enough and open enough for God to transform us. And serving others can certainly be transformational, I know it has been for me.

But we don't have to wait to be transformed in order to serve, we just have to do what Mother Teresa suggested. "Just begin", she said, "Just begin." And when you do, it just may change your life.