

“Servanthood”

Date: Sept. 22, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Themes: Service, volunteer

Text: James 2:14-18; John 13:1-15

Occasion: Spiritual Gifts series

Today I want to explore with you what it means to have a “servant’s heart.” For the past couple of weeks we’ve been talking about our spiritual gifts, the call to serve, and the various ministries of the church. Today I want to think what it means to have a servant’s heart.

To begin our conversation I’d like to consider the difference between being a *servant* and being a *volunteer*. As we grow in our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, hopefully our attitude and motivation changes from a volunteer mentality to a servant mentality.

The word *volunteer* means different things to different people, but it is *not* a word we find in the Bible. The New Testament word is *servant*. Without minimizing the importance of volunteering, it is helpful to point out some differences between being a volunteer and being a servant.

When we talk about being a volunteer, we usually are describing a particular activity that is not at the center of one’s identity. Like, I volunteer to help at the concession stand to help my child’s school. Now, that may be important to you, it may reflect your values, but it is not at the center of who you are.

When we talk about being a servant, now we are describing something about our identity as a follower of Jesus. It describes an orientation to life; it clarifies or defines who we are. As Jesus was a servant-leader, we too are called to be servants. It becomes part of who we are.

Second, generally speaking, a volunteer gives of time and talent when it is convenient, or when it fits one’s schedule. I volunteer when it’s

convenient for me. When we move in the direction of becoming a servant, we begin to realize that a follower of Jesus is a servant all of the time.

There will come a time when we meet a person who needs our attention or compassion, and it may not fit our schedule. As a servant of Christ, we make the time and we serve, because that's what we hear Jesus asking us to do.

A third distinction between a volunteer and a servant: a volunteer serves on the basis of his or her interests and values, whereas a servant is guided by the values of the kingdom of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. There will be times when we have to put aside our own interests and do the next right thing because that's what the gospel requires us to do.

A volunteer can easily say, "I didn't sign up for this," or "It's not my job," or "Let someone else do it." A servant says, "What does Jesus want me to do?"

In his book *"A Disciple's Path,"* the one we use for new member's class, James Harnish makes the point that as we grow in our understanding of discipleship; we begin to understand that faith in Jesus is more than simply having the right knowledge or belief. It also involves action.

In the book of James, the brother of Jesus reminds us that faith without action is dead. What we believe is directly connected with what we do. As we serve in our community, we grow in our faith. And as we grow in our faith, we learn to serve. Belief is like breathing in; serving is like breathing out; stop doing either one, and we die.

For several weeks now we have been talking about discovering and using our spiritual gifts. When we serve out of our spiritual gifts, we grow

into the likeness of Jesus the Servant, and we share in God's saving work in the world.

The pathway of discipleship leads us from a self-centered life to a Christ-centered life, from brokenness to wholeness, from apathy to compassion, from hearing to doing, from passive belief to energetic action. Along the way we discover that God has gifted us for servanthood in the body of Christ. In community with other disciples, we are made fit for ministry by the power of the Spirit of God.

When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he gave the most powerful object lesson the Church has ever witnessed. Here was the Lord of the Universe, down on his hands and knees, doing the work of a servant. The disciples were too proud. In fact, they were arguing among themselves as to which one of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus demonstrated what greatness is, in his new kingdom. It is the opposite of what the world thinks. The world thinks of greatness in terms of power, money, influence, prestige, glory and honor. Jesus flipped that idea on its head and says, "The greatest in the kingdom is the one who serves."

When we talk about having a servant's heart, we are talking about having the heart of Jesus. It is the willingness to see a need and to say, "Is God asking me to serve here?" And there is a presumption that we will say "yes." Too often, our default response is to say, "Not me. Let someone else do it." To have a servant's heart is to say, "Why not me?"

Of course we need to practice healthy self-care. There are some Christians who have difficulty with, shall I say, the inability, to say "no." We can't solve all of the world's problems on our own. We can't meet every person's need who appears before us. We need to practice healthy self-care.

Some of you need to give yourself permission to say “no” once in a while. Others of you need to push yourself to say “yes” more often. To have a servant’s heart is to have the willingness to say “Yes” to Jesus when He taps you on the shoulder and says, “It’s your turn. You can handle this. You won’t do it alone. I’ll be here with you. I’m asking *you* to serve.”

Sometimes His voice will come as a whisper. You’ll be watching the news and hear about a flood in another part of the country, and you’ll think, “Who’s going to help them?” and the thought comes to mind, “I wonder what I could do?” And you begin to explore options. I could send money. I could sign-up to serve on a clean-up team. I could offer my prayers.

Sometimes His voice will come as a phone call from a member of the Lay Leadership Committee. “Would you be willing to serve on the missions committee? We feel you have the spiritual gifts to help this ministry team.”

And you will need to pray about it. Don’t give them your answer immediately. Pray about whether this is where God is calling you to use your spiritual gifts. If it is, call them back and tell them yes. If it is not, call them back and ask if there is another place where you could serve instead.

My friends, we grow in our likeness of Christ and in our faith when we give, not when we’re always taking. In one of the first songs written about Christ, found in Philippians chapter two, we hear how Jesus emptied Himself for the world, poured Himself out and gave Himself away.

Jesus came to serve, and not be served. We are closest to Jesus when we are performing acts of service, even when it seems demeaning, like washing feet, or drying dishes or working at a soup kitchen.

And sometimes we have to be like the disciples in John 13, and we need to allow others to wash our feet, that is to say – to minister to us.

That's hard for some of you. You have been doing for others all of your lives and you're not used to letting others serve you. The cross of Christ challenges us to be weak, for it is only in Him and through Him that we are strong.

So let me ask you, do you consider yourself a volunteer or a servant? And if you find yourself answering volunteer, are you willing to grow in your faith, to become more like Christ? Volunteers are important and we're grateful to have them. But in the Body of Christ, we are learning to have a servant's heart. Amen? Amen.

Let us now pray our opening prayer:

“Lord Jesus, you humbled yourself and became a servant to show us the way of self-giving love. Teach us the way of servanthood that we might become the agents of your saving love in this world. Amen.”

(A Disciple's Path, James Harnish, 2012, p. 87)

Much of this sermon is derived from the work of James Harnish and Justin LaRosa, *“A Disciple's Path: Deepening Your Relationship with Christ and the Church,”* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 85-86.