

“Building Community: The Spirit of Service”

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Ephesians 6:5-9

Children’s Time

I heard about a teacher in an elementary school that would use a crown in the classroom. When it was a student’s birthday, they got to wear a crown and be the “king or queen for the day.”

Being a king or queen brought a lot of special privileges with it. For example, when you wore the crown, you got to be first in line everywhere the class went that day. If you wore the crown you got to lead the class to recess, to the library, to gym class, and to music. You even got to be first in line to eat lunch.

The king or queen for the day also got to do special things like taking the attendance sheet to the office. Kids in the class really liked being the king or queen for the day because all of the other students looked up to them and wished they were able to do all those things.

All of the students in the class looked forward to the day when they got to wear the crown.

Would you like to be a king or queen in real life? A king or queen usually lives in a palace and has a lot of money, silver, and gold, and jewels. They are surrounded by servants who get them anything they want. Everyone looks up to them and thinks they are great.

Would you like to be treated like a king or queen every day?

Well, there was a real king who took off his crown and gave up his throne to become a servant. That King was Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus put aside all of those things that other kings would have to become a servant.

When Jesus was on earth, he spent his entire life in service to others. He healed the sick, he fed the hungry, he was a friend to those who had no friends. Jesus never lived in a palace. He had no money, no silver or gold, no jewels, and he never wore a king’s crown.

As Christians, we try to be like Jesus and that means that we try to serve others more than looking for others to serve us.

Sermon

We live in a world where we have identified racism and slavery as evil. There are laws that enforce and reinforce the moral principle that it is not right to own another human being, or to control them to do your will.

In our country's past, the institution of slavery was an economic driver that made a certain group of people (white people) very wealthy and powerful while keeping poor and suppressing the advancement of black's through forced labor and servitude.

Along the way, people saw clearly the realities of slavery and stood up to declare this institution unjust. The Civil War was fought with this tension as a backdrop. Afterward there were laws put in place that made slavery illegal.

However, slavery has persisted underground — right up to this day.

In fact, slavery, now called “human trafficking” is rampant not only in developing countries, but here in the United States, where tens of thousands of people, often children are kidnapped or threatened and coerced, held against their will, and

forced to do things that they would otherwise never do.

The Department of Justice did a study and created a report a few years ago involving suspected human trafficking incidents from 2008-11. Here are a few of their findings:

1. From 2008 to 2010, Federal anti-trafficking task forces opened 2,515 suspected cases of human trafficking.
2. 82% of suspected incidents were classified as sex trafficking and nearly half of these involved victims under the age of 18.
3. Approximately 10% of the incidents were classified as labor trafficking.
4. 83% of victims in confirmed sex-trafficking incidents were identified as U.S. citizens, while 67% of confirmed labor-trafficking victims were identified as undocumented immigrants and 28% were legal immigrants.

These statistics were the government's best estimate of the incidents of which they were aware, however the researchers say that there are many more people who

are victims of human trafficking that are not found in the data.

This past week, NBC reported that there was an FBI sting, Operation Cross Country XI, that rescued 84 children from a multi-state human trafficking ring and arrested 120 traffickers.

This FBI effort was part of an initiative put in place during President George W. Bush's first term and has led to freeing 6,500 children since 2003.

We, together as a culture and society, whether Republicans or Democrats, condemn human trafficking as wrong, immoral, abusive, and evil.

We come to scripture with this perspective.

READ EPHESIANS 6:5-9

When we read passages like this, that do not condemn slavery, but may seem to endorse and uphold the practice, it leaves us troubled. We wonder, if slavery is so evil why did Paul not condemn it?

Passages like these have caused people, perhaps even those in Birmingham, to doubt the validity of scripture and its relevance in our

current world. People often conclude that a passage like this seems to lead us backward into primitive ways. They say that we must move beyond these archaic "biblical" ways and therefore must leave scripture behind.

However, this is not a helpful way to read the bible. It is much more helpful to consider the context of a passage, understanding what was going on around the ideas and practices of slavery at the time it was written and read it from that perspective trying to understand what it might have meant to those for whom it was originally written.

In Paul's day, most households, except for the very poor, would have one or more slaves. Slaves would take care of daily tasks, special projects, and often care for children.

Many slaves were valued, respected, and treated very well. They lived within and very truly as part of their master's family.

Others were not valued as human beings by their careless masters, but were abused and mistreated in about every way you can imagine.

Even so, slaves were accepted as part of the fabric of society and the

way the world worked. A society without slaves was unthinkable.

It would be for us like trying to imagine a world without electricity. Can you imagine all of those things that you plug in (cell phone, TV, lights, furnaces, etc.) not working? We saw the reality of this when Puerto Rico was hit by the hurricane that wiped out all of the power to the island. It was literally a situation of life and death for people.

What Paul was not trying to do was tear down societal structures, and start from scratch to redesign how the world works. To advocate for a society without slavery would have been a losing battle.

Instead, Paul remarkably takes a look under the surface to what governs the relationships between people.

At the time, there was a one-way sense of responsibility in their society — slaves must obey their masters, period. That was it. The same went for children, who must simply obey their parents, period.

But Paul recognized the equality of each person under the Lordship of Jesus. So, mutual respect and responsibility was to be upheld

between everyone. It was not to be only the slaves who respected their masters, but the masters were to understand that they too had a master and were to treat their slaves as well as all others with respect, understanding that they had rights.

In Paul's day, like ours, there were power differentials. Those with more power had the legal code on their side, because they were the ones who had the influence to create the system for their own benefit.

Paul took a step beyond the power differential between people and said that all were created by God and fall equally under the Lordship of Jesus. When we truly understand this, there is no place for arrogance, superiority, or the place to look down on anyone for any reason.

If we are going to be building Christian community here, this is the place where service happens. — where all are found in a level, and equal place, and we join with the Holy Spirit to serve others.

Several years ago, I took a group of high school and middle school students from Livingston County on a handful of trips into the

Brightmoor community of Detroit to paint boards on abandoned houses, clean up vacant lots, and take care of community gardens. In the process we got to develop relationships with people in a different environment.

On the way back to Livingston County after one trip, we were talking about our experiences on the trip, and one of the middle school girls looked at me and said “Was that a mission trip we just took?”

You see, her only understanding of a mission trip, was one where you get in a van or bus, go a long way away, and serve people who are poor and who you will never see again.

When we go on a mission trip we assume the power differential. We are the ones who “have” and the ones we serve are the “have nots.”

We often think of serving that way. We distance ourselves from the ones we serve by labeling the other as “those poor people over there.” They are not like us or even located where we are.

Our mission is to serve them as a one-directional sort of activity. This leads us to pity those we serve and

think of them as wholly separate and different from us.

Paul offers us a new way to think about the people we serve, a new way to think about ourselves and to understand relationships.

Paul said that we are all a community of equals under God’s Lordship.

And “we” includes all of us who serve as well as all whom we endeavor to serve. We are all equals in God’s family.

It is so easy to slide into the power differential, dominant in the world around us without even knowing it, and consider those we serve as less than us. But God’s way of community is that all of those we serve, all of those with whom we minister are equals in God’s sight.

How would ministry and building a community in Birmingham be different if we viewed ourselves, and all people, the way that God does?