

Real Faith for Real Life: Serving

Lesson: I Cor. 12:4 & John 13:1, 3-5, 12-15

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=31&search=I%20Cor.%2012:4;John%2013:1,3-5,12-15>

Over the last three weeks we have been practicing what Michael Foss calls “the six marks of discipleship”: Praying, Worshipping, Reading the Bible, Serving, Relating, Giving. These are the marks of a soul that is fully alive in God. And since we want everyone to have a soul that is fully alive in God, we’re working on these marks together.

The first three marks of discipleship – praying, worshipping, reading the Bible – are all personal practices. They are centered in your direct relationship with God.

Today’s mark, serving or service, begins our learning about corporate practices – that is, practices that are centered in God’s relationship with others through us, or with us through others. They cannot be done alone in our rooms; they are essentially about our connectedness with others. Why are we essentially connected with others? Because God is, and we are connected to God. Independence is an illusion. We are at essence connected beings, because we are connected to God and through God.

I suspect that I don’t have to convince you of the value of serving others. Is there anyone in here who does not believe that serving others is good? We all know that serving others is a good thing to do, a noble thing, a righteous thing. Where we can use some course correction, some learning about serving, is in the way we think about it.

Let’s just name some false beliefs about serving – see how many of these you believe:

- § Serving is something to be completed, or retired from.
- § Paying for serving is the same as serving.
- § As you age you cannot serve as well or as much.
- § When you are bad-off – poor or chronically ill or depressed – you cannot and ought not serve others.
- § You shouldn’t have to ask people to serve; they should just pitch in.
- § Serving is what you do when others don’t do what they should be doing. (This is what I call the Martha disease.)
- § There are people who serve and people who are served.

If you search your soul, you may find you believe all kinds of falsehoods about serving. Those false beliefs will prevent you from serving, or they will prevent you from serving in a Godly way.

Here’s the thing: the kind of service Jesus talked about, the kind we are called to practice, not a burden. It is a discipline – a practice – but it is not a weight or an anxiety. But if you believe any of those falsehoods I named earlier, even a little bit, you may find that you do serve AND your service is both self-centered and joyless. Your beliefs about serving may be destroying your joy. You may be making yourself into a self-centered, joyless-but-busy wretch prevented from doing the one thing most or all of us agree is good! How self-destructive is that!

What is service? Godly service is not about doing things because they need to be done – though that is both admirable and useful. Godly service is seeing Jesus in others and responding to him with love.

We know from the practice of worship that when we see Jesus and love him, we feel joy. Joy is not the same as happiness – we can feel joy when we are not happy. Service is seeing Jesus in others, and responding to the Jesus we see in them with love. So when we truly serve, we experience joy.

That means that service, true service, has at least 4 qualities: 1) True service expresses our God-given gifts. 2) Godly service emanates from recognizing Jesus in ourselves and in others. 3) Service comes from God and is our purpose. 4) And it is practiced in joy.

1) True service expresses our God-given gifts. God has given each of us gifts to be used to glorify God in service. Paul's letter to the people of the church at Corinth reminds us of that: we all have different gifts in different proportions, but all gifts are from God, and all are intended to be used to serve and glorify God. True service expresses and utilizes our gifts. When you use your God-given gifts, you find pleasure in the doing. That means we need to discover our gifts. Often the things we do most often in a day or a week, particularly if we're not used to Godly service, are not actually expressive of our God-given gifts. Learning what our gifts are, through feedback and spiritual inventories, can help us discover our purpose and the service that will bring us joy.

2) Godly service emanates from recognizing Jesus in ourselves and in others. Most of us have to work at this — recognizing Jesus in ourselves and others — it doesn't come naturally. The demon voices and distorted mirrors in our heads prevent us from recognizing Jesus in ourselves. Insecurity, impatience, and ego prevent us from recognizing Jesus in others. But in order to serve, you have to recognize Jesus in others and respond to that recognition, to that love. This is why most of what we call "serving" isn't — it's not about other people at all, and it's certainly not about worshipping Jesus through our activities on behalf of others. That disconnect comes from not recognizing Jesus when we see him.

There's a great old story, known as "The Rabbi's Gift." There are many versions, but here's the gist of it: A monastery had existed for many centuries, but it had fallen on hard times. The monks who were left were all old, and, while they had developed great intellectual understanding, they had also become lonely and dispirited and barely connected with each other. They saw each other in prayer time, but that was it.

One day, a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery to ask for hospitality. The abbot let the rabbi in, showed him where the food was and where he might sleep, and then let him alone. After a few days, the rabbi was getting ready to move on. The abbot of the monastery sought out the rabbi as he prepared to leave. "My brother in God", the abbot said. "My monks are old. Sometimes they are even cranky. They keep to themselves and no longer help around the monastery. The spirit has gone out of this place, and has left the brothers here. You are a man of God, and you have traveled much and seen many things. How might I save this monastery? How might I save my monks?" The rabbi shook his head. "I don't know how you can do that" he said sorrowfully. "But I know this: the Messiah is one of you." And the rabbi shouldered his bag and left.

The abbot gathered the monks together and told them what the rabbi had said. They shook their heads. One of them even spat on the ground. "Some help he was. He ate our food and stayed in our beds, but didn't help us at all." But as they walked off, they started thinking about what the rabbi had said. "The Messiah is one of you." The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?

Slowly, their prayers all starting sounding the same: "O God, could it be me? I couldn't be that much for You, could I?" And slowly, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. They would seek each other out, and give comfort and aid to each other. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect, and they accepted the comfort and aid of others. Each one saw the Messiah — saw Jesus — in themselves, and in each of the others, and in all their visitors. And because they did, they longed to serve each other, and to be in each other's company. After a couple of years, the place developed an aura of extraordinary respect, love, and joy permeating the place. Visitors began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. So within a few years the monastery once again thrived.

One more thing about this: often we start out doing something out of love, but we get so caught up in the doing of it — in doing it perfectly, in doing it by ourselves, in fulfilling our vision — that all the love goes

out of it. To serve, our activity must come from love and have love in it. That may be fixed by doing something as basic as stopping and taking a moment to worship God or pray, and then beginning again.

3) Service comes from God and is our purpose. That means we are never too old, too broken, too poor, or too busy to serve. Maybe you've gotten tired, or think that you've done your share. Maybe you cannot do what you used to do, and so believe God has nothing left for you. You must remember that you were made for service. If you're still here, God has something for you to do. Our gifts are not grounded in our skills or our physicality: God doesn't give gifts and give you no way to use them. In fact, God calls you and then equips you. So if you think you don't have any way to give back to God, think again.

And if you think you're finished, or it's someone else's turn, it's time to straighten out your self-centered thinking. Serving isn't about you; it's about God. There will be times when you hurt, physically, spiritually, emotionally, or think that you have nothing to give anymore.

That is precisely the time when you must discover your gifts and begin again, because nothing will heal you like healing others.

Serving doesn't have to be big projects. Remember: serving is using your gifts, recognizing the Jesus in others, and reaching out to that in love. I read an internet story of a minor miracle. A man had been away from worship and community for a number of years after the death of his wife. After her death, and after the funeral, it felt so strange to go anywhere without her but especially into a church. And, then the weeks went by, and the weeks turned into years. But one Sunday, God inspired him, or he decided, to try to go. It was really hard to break the habit of the last few years, and going to worship reminded him of his lost wife. He knew he needed to go. He didn't know why. But he knew he needed to go. So he went. Stepping over that threshold, and into that sanctuary, was very hard. Terrifying, in fact. He felt alone, and out of place. He'd arrived early, accidentally, misjudging the time. He sat alone in the center of a pew, two empty pews behind him and just one in front, a brave, sad, solitary man.

Six rows behind him, in the back of the sanctuary, sat a couple of people, long-time attenders. They always sat in the same place, in the back. But then a miracle happened. They saw the man, really saw him, a new person, sitting by himself. They looked at each other, slid out of their pew, and quietly moved down the aisle to slip in beside the man.

Where's the miracle in that? Both the man and the worshippers left their comfort zones. Leaving our comfort zone, or our familiar seats, is hard. But miracles happen when we forget about ourselves, really see someone else, and act out of our compassion. We have to practice serving because getting out of ourselves is hard. But service comes from God — we are created to serve.

4) True service is practiced in joy. It is done from joy and causes joy. Martyrdom is not service. Getting stuff done with gritted teeth and heightened blood pressure because no one else will do it is not service. Doing good things because you don't want to feel guilty is not service. Doing it all yourself because no one volunteered (and no one asked) isn't service. Service is an act of worship, and must be done in joy.

That doesn't mean it's always fun, or always easy. But when you are doing what you were created to do with the gifts God has given you because you recognize Jesus in someone, you get joyful in the doing.

Now some people do all the things they're supposed to do, but they get anxious or cranky about it. That's the Martha syndrome. You know the story of Martha and Mary — Lazarus brings home Jesus and the disciples for dinner, so Martha starts preparing the food and laying out the table. But her sister Mary is sitting listening to Jesus. So Martha complains to Jesus — actually sort of whines and snaps and gripes — that Mary isn't helping like she should be. And she asks Jesus to chastise Mary for not helping her. But Jesus says "Martha ... you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." Jesus doesn't chide Martha because she's not sitting and learning. He chides her because she "was distracted by all the preparations that had

to be made." Martha wasn't practicing the mark of discipleship known as serving. She was anxious. Distracted. Cranky. There was no love in it. There was no worship.

Are you a Martha? Caught up by the hard work but resentful or anxious about it? Here's the thing: if you aren't experiencing joy in serving, you have to look not at what others are doing, but how you are doing what you are doing and why you are doing it. Joy starts with an attitude of worship and a practice of love. If service isn't giving you joy, that's about you. It means either you're not using your God-given gifts, or you're not seeing the Jesus in others or yourself, or you don't believe God has something for you to do.

The other thing that can prevent joy is having the idea that the world in general, and the church in particular, exists to serve you. Because you were born, or worked hard, or paid your dues, you should be served. There are people in the church who, even after all these years worshipping God think that the lights are on and the musician arrives and the coffee is made for the members — that it's here for the members. They think the church is for the members. Like a private club is for the members. But — and you know this — while we are the church, the church is for those who need hope. The church is for those who need care. The church is for those who need courage, or help, or community, or strength. We who are following the way of Jesus are church for those have not yet found God, or who are hungry in body or soul, or who are shackled, or who are broken. We are the church, but the church is for them. Which means we must be for them. Our purpose is to serve them. (And, remembering #2, the "them" who need our service, because of hunger, fear, or pain, will sometimes be us.)

If anyone deserved to be served, it was Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But Jesus knew he was created to serve and given gifts to serve AND his service was so grounded in a practice of worship, prayer, and reading the scripture that it gave him joy. That is, Jesus, and I'm quoting now, Jesus "knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God." Jesus rested and trusted in his place in God's love, and in his purpose on this earth. And so Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. And then he washed the disciples' dirty, calloused, rough, smelly, disgusting feet.

And don't you know that he experienced joy? Don't you know he felt the presence and the power of God? And don't you know that the disciples were terribly embarrassed by receiving his love? And that they needed to be loved by him, to be tenderly touched by Jesus, more than they needed the meal or money or anything else? And don't you know that's why he commanded us to do the same?

Everyone can serve. And everyone was created for that purpose — to glorify God and to serve God's people. And everyone was given gifts to fulfill that purpose. And every one, even you, can experience the joy of loving and being loved by God.

Let us pray together: Lord, you made us in your image and made us to love and to live out our purpose. You gave us the task of tenderly caring for the earth and each other, and gave us joy in doing it. You call us to love and equip us to do it. Free us from the falsehoods that ruin us for service. Inspire in us a love of you through Jesus that makes us take the time and attention to love others. Send us out, Lord, to glorify you with the work of our hands and hearts. Send us out to serve you. *Amen.*