

A Life of Service

Isaiah 53: 4-12; Mark 10:35-45

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Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction: Time

Last week as I was writing my sermon, I often do my sermons at home, so I was at home trying to work on my sermon or avoiding working on my sermon, or whatever I was doing at the moment, and about 11 o'clock in the morning I had my doorbell rang. I answered the door and an older woman named Juanita was there. Juanita explained to me that she was homeless and that her SSI check had been late this month and asked me if I had any food that I could share with her. So, I prepared a bagged lunch for her and gave it to her. She went on with her day, but I was sort of struck by my surprise at finding her on my doorstep and it struck me how easily and how quickly we can isolate and insulate ourselves from the struggles of the city around us.

Last week we began our stewardship sermon series, and as you all know when I say stewardship, that's usually a code word that says I'm getting ready to ask you for money. And that is the case obviously, but stewardship is much more than money. It's about how we use all of the resources that God has given us and we're actually entitling this Stewardship season *It's About Time* because we want to reflect on how we're using our time in addition to our other resources to celebrate God's work among us.

Time, of course, is in short supply for all of us. And if you're like me, you spend much of your day when you wake up in the morning you've got great dreams about what your day is going to look like and what you're going to accomplish. And then you get pulled in this direction, in that direction, and you're hurried and scurrying and spread thin, and you get to the end of the day and you say to yourself, "What happened? The day had such possibility and it's all gone now."

And most of us are self-aware enough to know that much of our struggle with time has to do with our own reactivity to the things that cross our plate in the course of a day, and that the key to being good stewards of our time has to do with being proactive with how we decided we're going to use our time and what are the important pieces of that. There's I think a very helpful image that is very standard in time management circles which talks about our day as a container and we've got to fill it with big rocks and little pebbles and sand. And if you put the pebbles and the sand in first, you never can get the big rocks in. They don't fit. But if you put the big rocks in first and then pour in the pebbles and then the sand, the pebbles and the sand all find the empty crevices around the big rocks and you could get everything to fit. Our priorities are the big rocks and the work that we do for God is a big rock. I want to call it the biggest rock but that's my profession. And the issue with our time is that if all of the other stuff gets in the jar first, we can't fit that rock in. And so, what we're talking about over these weeks is how we get those rocks in place first so the other stuff can fill in around it. And that's how we do the work that we are called to do and that's how our lives are given meaning and purpose.

We're taking each of these weeks during the series to look at a different program area of our church. You all know that we've got the work of our church divided into five areas and one of those is our serving ministries, which is where we're focusing today. What I want you to do, however, is rather than every week be manically looking at the things that you need to jump in on, I want you to take these wonderful resources that we have provided in your bulletins, and I want you to do some reflecting and praying and listening to where God may be leading you in one of these areas. We all have different gifts and graces that we bring to this process, and each of us is going to hear a call in a different area. Here is my challenge for you. If God has a call for each of us to engage in the work of kingdom building, my question for you as we move through these weeks is: where are you hearing a call from God, where are you feeling a nudge to move into some area of work in the church? That's what our goal is for this stewardship period.

II. The Heart of the Gospel Call.

This morning we are talking about service. Our Gospel lesson, which is from the lectionary today, is a wonderful reminder of how quickly we can lose focus on the core of who we are as Christian disciples, which is our call to be in service. I love to picture this scene in my head -- it takes place in the narrative at a point where Jesus and the disciples have started to move towards Jerusalem. So, the story is building quickly to its climax. Along the road to Jerusalem, Jesus has stopped periodically to talk to the disciples about the crucifixion and get them ready for what is coming. And so, just before today's lesson, Jesus has stopped with the disciples and said, "Listen, we're getting to Jerusalem and the Son of Man is going to be handed over to the chief priest and scribes. They're going to humiliate him, they're going to spit on him, they're going to kill him, and you need to be ready." And then James and John come up and they say to Jesus, "Listen, after all that stuff is done, I'm hoping that you can put James and I at your right and left hand in the kingdom. Does that work for you?" And I can see Jesus' expression, "Really? This is your takeaway? I've been talking about the crucifixion and this is your takeaway? Okay. Let's start from the beginning."

Power and prestige that the world around us tells us are primary are not what we are about. We are about serving each other and it is in that process of serving that we become great, that we become all of who God has invited us and challenged us to be.

We are blessed with the opportunity of living in a city where serving others is an ongoing opportunity and that has been at the heart of our congregation for decades. It has shaped who we are. We live in a city that epitomizes the growing split between the have and the have-nots and those who have succeeded and those who are being left behind.

Dick Schleicker and Bruce Weber and I were at a community meeting a couple of weeks ago where the head of DHS was talking about homelessness in Ward 3, and one of the Ward 3 residents said to her, "So, what is the connection between poverty and homelessness?" And she got this quizzical look on her face, almost exactly the look I

think that Jesus had when James and John came up to him. And you could see her pause and take a deep breath and say, "There is 100 percent correlation, because if you have money you don't become homeless. It's as simple as that. If you have money, even if you wrestle with mental illness, even if you wrestle with substance abuse, if you have money you don't end up on the street." Now she said it more nicely than that. But there was this quizzical look on her face that said, "How can you not understand how crystal clear this is?"

According to our last count, we continue to have over 7000 people homeless in our city right now. Now that's a little bit of improvement over last year but how much improvement depends dramatically on what demographic group you are a part of. So, for example, we've had great success in improving the status of homeless veterans, far fewer vets are on the street which is an amazing thing and a success story. We have, however, also had a huge rise in homeless families, so that between 2011 and 2014 we've had a 29 percent increase in the number of families with children who are homeless in our city.

And when you start broadening the dialogue to look at other manifestations of poverty, you find that 30 percent of the household with children in our city are food insecure, which means that they don't know that they're going to have the resources to get through a month without missing meals. Thirty percent of our families with children. And the thing that I have a hard time getting my head around, dear friends, is 30 percent of our families with children are at risk of hunger in a country where we throw away 40 percent of the food that we produce and where 74 percent of the adults are overweight or obese. There's a problem in our system, right? Solving hunger in our city is not a matter of lack of resources. It is a lack of will and a lack of imagination. And one of the things that I'm so grateful for in our Campus Kitchen program is addressing both the hunger and the waste as we repurpose food and get it to those in need.

III. A Ministry of Presence

Our Hebrew Scripture lesson this morning is one of the four beautiful servant songs that Isaiah writes about and that so powerfully foreshadow the work of Christ. And what struck me after reading that this week in conjunction with the Gospel lesson is this image of the suffering servant locating himself in the place of suffering. That God's healing work for the world happens not through grand policy decisions, but when we as God's servants place ourselves with the hungry and the homeless, and when that happens God's work starts to take place.

He would be mortified if I told this story but if David Argo is not here, and I don't see him, I'm going to tell it. David is a dear friend of our church, as many of you know, who was our district superintendent for several years, and 15 or 20 years ago he was pastor of Capitol Hill UMC which is where Dottie Yunger was. As Capitol Hill was getting their ministry to the homeless off the ground, David took the time to spend nights out sleeping on the church steps with the guys that they were going to be in ministry with. That was transforming for him, but what I learned this week was that the current pastor

down there, Alisa Lasater, still gets comments from the homeless guys who remember David by name because he spent the night out there with them. They say, "How's Pastor David doing?" Decades later, his presence transformed them and himself. That's what the suffering servant songs are about.

And that's what our ministries of service are about here in Metropolitan. We do some great and powerful advocacy work, which is part of the spectrum, but we've got this incredibly rich host of opportunities where we get to roll up our sleeves and locate ourselves in the places where suffering happens. And whether that's bringing meals and sharing meals with our shelter residents, whether that's taking meals out on the streets through our Grate Patrol program, whether that's taking meals across the river through the Campus Kitchen partnerships that we're developing, whether it's building homes in Appalachia, whether it's building farms in Ward 7, it's about placing ourselves where there is need and suffering and allowing that to be a redemptive action so that God's spirit and power start to move in situations where they weren't moving before.

And part of our understanding there is that when we do that, when we encounter those who are hungry and homeless and in need in our city, they change and we change, so that how we understand those problems and who we understand those problems to impact becomes different for us. And that's how our society changes.

IV. Conclusion

You know, it wasn't always the fact that we were so isolated from those in need and I have heard my dad tell the story many times of how growing up in Washington, homeless guys would come to the backdoor of their home and my Grandmother Parker would make them a plate of food and share some food with them and send them on their way -- this was during The Depression. It strikes me that part of the reason that we could develop the political will to put the New Deal in place and raise so many people out of homelessness and poverty was because it was in front of us and we engaged it, we saw it and we knew it and we knew people. I wonder if we would address poverty as a national issue differently if we took the time to engage those people that God has called us to serve.

Amen.