

Beloved & Baptized: Now What? (Service)

5th Sunday in Lent - March 21, 2010, Leonard Eberhart
Isaiah 43: 16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3: 4b-14; John 12:1-8

Fred Craddock, preacher and storyteller, recalls visiting a church on a Sunday afternoon. He watched a van pull up in the church parking lot and a bunch of young people got out. They looked like thirteen, fourteen, maybe up to eighteen years old. Fred said he thought there were ten or twelve young people who belonged to that church. Fred continued, “They were pulling out bed rolls. It was the awfulest looking bunch of kids you’ve ever seen, something like the cats would drag in. They were in really bad shape.” Fred said, “What is this?”

The youth proceeded to tell Fred that they were returning from a work mission trip. They had spent a week along with some other young people to build a church for a community. They were beat. “Aw”, Fred said, “They looked terrible.”

They sat down on their bags waiting for their parents to come. Fred said to one of the boys, “You tired?” And he said, “Whew, am I tired!” Then he continued, “This is the best tired I’ve ever felt!”¹

A number of us, youth and adults, know from personal experience what that sort of tired is like. In another week we’ll have a team experiencing this sort of tired after giving their energies to help further the restoration in Cedar Rapids. Participating in such a mission work trip is nothing short of responding to a calling from God to a form of service.

Today I’m continuing a five part sermon series on the five expressions of our membership covenant. I’m convinced that unless we give thoughtful, prayerful attention to the promise we’ve made, we are less likely to take the covenant seriously. The promise we make is to “support the ministry of the UMC through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness”. Today I want to reflect with you what it means to be in “service”.

Service is really another way to talk about our calling. Many times we keep the idea of Divine calling restricted to that of ordained ministry. While those of us who are ordained do understand ourselves to be called by God for this work, we aren’t the only ones who are called by God. Every member of the church is called to Christian ministry at our baptism. Each one is called; it’s just that some of us talk about our calling more than others.

The voice of God calls us to service through a variety of tasks. It’s unfortunate that the idea of calling gets watered down by the notion that we are called to one vocation. God’s calling is much wider than to one particular job. Consider with me, is one’s career more of a calling than my marriage? Is my obligation as a

¹ *Craddock Stories*, Fred Craddock, p. 94

citizen of inferior importance to my association with my family? God's calling upon each of us encompasses the whole of our lives as ministry. We don't live part of our life doing God's will and then just do whatever we want with the rest of our time and effort.

Our commissioning at baptism acknowledges God's comprehensive call in each of our lives. Some to preach the gospel, others to heal the sick, there are those who build houses, those who wait tables with a smile, or farm the land, drive trucks, sell insurance, volunteer, serve as homemakers, teach our children, or take risks to keep the rest of us safe. In most cases we have multiple dimensions of calling. In some church bulletins I've seen a proper delineation indicating those who are the pastors and then naming the entire congregation as the ministers.

David was a member of Grace UMC in Des Moines. He was not the type who would "toot his own horn." At his funeral service, his call in life became clear. He played a role in creating the Office of Pastoral Care and Counseling in the Iowa Annual Conference. David was an advocate for this office to be created for the support and care of clergy in their work with congregations. At his funeral his niece had this to say about her Uncle David:

"David's commitment to his church and his world as a Christian informed his consciousness to the degree that his life was a calling from God. His vocation embraced the spirit of the gospel of Matthew which enjoins the feeding of the hungry, the sheltering of the homeless, the clothing of the naked, the comforting of the sorrowing, the provision of hospitality to the stranger."²

David's life and action conveyed a sense that he heard the calling of God and it echoed through how he lived out his passions that touched countless others. His was a life of Christian service.

One of the ways to measure whether we're responding to a Heavenly call is the degree of meaning we derive from the things we do. The culture in which we live and do what we do measures our efforts in terms of speed, productivity and efficiency. We end up getting weighed down with demands and expectations. How many times do you feel that there aren't enough hours in the day, you can never do enough to satisfy, to the point of feeling ineffective and worthless.

While we all need a living wage, salary and bonuses are finally not what fulfill us. It's important to pause every now and then to reflect and listen more carefully for the Divine calling in our life. One of the classic ways to define Christian calling is to pay attention to those places where the world's needs and our spiritual gifts intersect. That's where we'll discover our vocation and place of service. In order to do this well, we

²I'm very grateful for the faithful work done by Bishop Gregory Palmer, the Reverends Scott Kober and Jill Sanders and their insightful writing in *Promises to Keep: A Study of Membership in the United Methodist Church* (p. 23-24) as a primary resource for this sermon series: "Beloved & Baptized: Now What?"

have to be aware of our God given gifts and sensitive to the needs of the world around us. While this discovery is important for young persons beginning their life endeavors, it's important for adults of any age to periodically do this sort of review. Often it's a matter of reaffirming God's original call in our lives, sometimes it's responding to a new call. Occasionally it's a matter of finally yielding to God's call that may have been resisted for a long time.

The Mary and Martha story is a classic account of service. Some of the back story to the gospel account has Martha complaining to Jesus because Mary isn't helping her in the kitchen. One gets the impression Martha sees Mary's attention to Jesus as less productive. In today's reading Judas gets into the conversation with his complaint about Mary wasting this costly ointment on Jesus, that the proceeds would have been more beneficial if they were spent on the poor. The text already makes a comment on Judas's possible motivation for saying this.

Jesus' final reply really helps to set the record straight for both Martha and Judas. *"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."* On the surface, this saying of Jesus comes across somewhat egocentric. The practical application of what Jesus said is something like the instruction about the use of oxygen masks on an airplane. It seems counter intuitive to put ones face mask on before placing the mask on a helpless child. The instruction doesn't mean to imply that one cares about the child less than self, but it focuses on making sure the care giver is connected to the life source in order to be of most help to the child. Jesus seems to be making a similar statement. The needs of the poor will be with us for a long time. For now, focus on the connection with your life source, then you will always have what you need to care for others. Jesus' saying is a heritage recipe for living out our covenant of Christian service.

INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

The expression of service in our covenant with God takes on many varied forms.

One of the ways we engage in service beyond the Grinnell Community is through mission work trips.

We have 6-8 who are planning on giving some time in the Cedar Rapids restoration beginning next Fri.

Your prayers are asked for the team to help all of the members share the light of Christ through these efforts.

If you're prompted to support this mission venture financially, you may purchase a portion of a share.

Joyfully serving others is how we practice faithful stewardship.

The ushers will come to receive our tithes and offerings.

I'll be ready to receive the offerings of the children.

THE BENEDICTION

John Wesley calls his followers to practice the Means of Grace, which includes acts of mercy. We live out our covenant to honor Christ by engaging service in his name. Watch for opportunities to serve Christ this week. Remember the poor and those who suffer. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Amen.



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Questions to Ponder during Lent

1. "This is the best tired I've ever felt." Reflect on a time when you have had this feeling.
2. What acts of mercy and service are needed around you? What needs to change for that need to end?
3. How can your spiritual gifts (note the top six of your Spiritual Gifts) be used in the church or community?

Engaging in Ministry of Service Practices

1. What act of neighborliness could you offer this week?
2. What skill do you have that someone might experience as a blessing: cooking, letter writing, yard work, reading to someone, caring contact (visit/phone call/greeting sent)?