

“Being the Church that SERVES”

NT: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
John 17:6-19
1 John 5:9-13

Acts 1 emphasizes the selection of apostleship. Being an apostle means to be sent. Sent by God. For what? To be a witness of God in thought, word, and action. It took full commitment on the part of the apostle to fulfill this calling. There was no greater calling and privilege Matthias could have been offered and called to. We are to make no mistake. Like Matthias, we are called to follow Christ as disciples, and we are sent as witnesses with a share in ministry. Also like Matthias, there is no greater calling and privilege we have during our life but to serve on behalf of God.

John 17 is reassurance that we are not alone in our ministry. Not only did Christ come to lead the way by setting the ultimate example, but this text reveals that Christ prays for those who serve in his name. This text is Jesus' prayer to God to protect and deliver those who follow and serve in the name of Christ. Without God's call, Christ's example, and the Holy Spirit's empowerment, our service, our living, has no real meaning. With God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, we have the hope and promise of being sanctified in God's truth.

1 John 5 is a charge reminding us that the testimony of God is greater than human testimony. What this tells us is that for those who allow God to live through them as their power and strength, they will be embodying the example and life of Jesus Christ, and the reward will be eternal life. Our call then is to be living testimonies and witnesses for Christ.

Important point of clarification: Our salvation is possible because of God's grace not something we earn through good works. There is nothing we can do to lose God's love for us and there is nothing we can do to earn more of God's love. God loves us and God's grace is available to us in abundance. That is a guarantee! When we believe in God, really believe in who God is and all God represents, God's love and grace become active and dare I say uncontrollable ingredients inside us and inside our lives. It is from God's presence inside us, activated by our faith in God, that we will not be able to contain ourselves as witnesses of God's truth and service.

I think of it like the science fair project we often see of an erupting volcano. The volcano is built and the environment and ingredients of the “lava” inside are prepared. Then you add the secret ingredient to make the volcano erupt and overflow. Our trinitarian God is that ingredient inside and our faith is the ingredient working to interact with God to allow God to overflow from within to others.

Being the Church that serves then is the natural outpouring of a Church that knows, abides and grows, worships, and loves.

There is a take on the “Footprints in the Sand” poem that provides something to ponder. It is entitled “Butt prints in the Sand.”

One night I had a wondrous dream,
One set of footprints there was seen,
The footprints of my precious Lord,
But mine were not along the shore.
But then some stranger prints appeared,
And I asked the Lord, “What have we here?
Those prints are large and round and neat,
But Lord, they are too big for feet.”
“My child,” He said in somber tones,
“For miles I carried you alone.
I challenged you to walk in faith,
But you refused and made me wait.
You disobeyed, you would not grow,
The walk of faith, you would not know,
So I got tired, I got fed up,
And there I dropped you on your butt.
Because in life, there comes a time,
When one must fight, and one must climb,
When one must rise and take a stand,
Or leave their butt prints in the sand.”

A couple things: One- Amen. Two- God doesn't get tired of carrying us. It makes sense for the point this version of the poem is trying to emphasize, but God doesn't get tired of carrying us. The promise is sure that God will never leave us or forsake us. That does not, however, mean that we are to lie limp and helpless. Three- God needs human counterparts and we are it. What are we doing about it? How have we fought, climbed, risen, and taken a stand for God?

Being the Church that serves is being the Church that walks and lives in faith!

The parable of the mustard seed suggests when we have faith the size of a mustard seed God will join with us and we will be able to move mountains. I do not know about you, but that is the best return on an investment there can ever be. With God, everything we are is made better. We are greater. We are faster. We are stronger. We are braver. We are more loving.

We are more empathetic. We are more willing. We are more gracious. We are more patient. We have more self-control. We are kinder. We are more generous. God makes us better. And when we are better, we can be better for others. Even if in the most unassuming ways.

My baby daughter's hands and feet went into suction-cup mode as I tried to hand her to the very nice lady in the church's infant room. "They only cry for a few minutes," the nursery volunteer promised. An hour later, a weary but still very nice lady handed me my teary-faced infant and said, "You moms have them all week... we're happy to give you a break." It wasn't hard to read between those lines. As a seasoned mother, though, I knew if I didn't leave my baby at the nursery again, she would continue to stay with me during the church service, so back we went the next week.

This time, I handed her to a very nice man- Mr. Neil. She stopped crying immediately. When I came back an hour later, she was still dry-eyed. Mr. Neil had held her the entire time. Over the next six months, she graduated to Mr. Neil's lap, then to Mr. Neil sitting next to her and finally to playing on her own while Mr. Neil watched. She enjoyed Sunday school, and I was able to listen to the church service again- something I desperately needed.

Two years later, I learned the first day Mr. Neil met her was to be his last day serving in Sunday school. But when he saw how much my daughter needed him, he extended his volunteering... at first week-to-week, and then for an entire six months until she moved up to the toddler room. All for a little girl who couldn't say his name, who would never remember his selflessness but, for whatever reason, became very attached to him. He did it for her. He had no idea I needed him just as much.

Processing my mom's cancer diagnosis while managing three young children, all under the weight of a demanding job, left me drowning. That one-hour church service was the only thing keeping me afloat. It was my favorite hour of the week, the only peace I got. When I had to miss church, I would literally cry. God clearly provided a helper for me when I needed it most, though I didn't see it at the time. I am so grateful our God tosses us lifelines even when we don't recognize they're from Him.

But I tell this story for a different reason. You, too, are likely a servant of some kind, whether you have an official title or not. Sometimes our service for others energizes us. Sometimes it exhausts us. But the Bible urges us not to give up doing the good God has called us to do. There's an eternal reward waiting on the other side of faithful service: an abundant harvest.

Mr. Neil could have moved on as he had planned, but instead, he saw a need coupled with his unique ability to meet it. So, he stayed, putting weariness aside and trusting God to provide energy and endurance.

Sometimes we don't see the full harvest of faithful service. The only harvest Mr. Neil saw was a little gift who stopped crying only for him. By the grace of God, that was enough. He had no idea of the spiritual harvest that was to come in me through his care for my daughter.

I love this little story. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered a few things. Was Mr. Neil young or old? Why was that last day supposed to be his last? (Health diagnosis, exhaustion, sense of purpose, belief it was someone else's time to step up, moving away, starting a new job that would make being present too difficult, a desire to participate in a class for himself or a desire to travel the world finally) We do not know exactly. Therefore, Mr. Neil could be anyone of us.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians with the charge, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Gal. 6:9)

Why do we serve? For the Beauty of the Earth and because we are called as partners in Christ's service. These are great reasons and I love these hymns. To dig a little deeper though, the reason we serve is to transform. Yes, we might very well be transformed while serving, but acts of service are so important because they rewrite a script. Acts of service share light and love and provide hope. Being the Church that serves is being the Church that transforms people and circumstances toward God.

A couple of thoughts come to mind as we think about what is at the core of serving others. At the core of serving others is:

- Building into the lives of others;
- Adding value to a life- to many lives;
- Going the extra mile for others;
- Looking outside of self to be aware of and help others;
- Guiding someone to a better place;
- Giving a hand up to provide opportunities that could assist others;
- Using the gifts God has given you and going beyond yourself to make a difference.

Our financial resources, time, and the sacrifice of other things we could be doing for ourselves is worth it. How can you, we together, look outside ourselves for someone to reach out to- to mentor, coach, teach, feed, clothe, provide transportation for, talk to, listen to, read a book to,

play a game with. Through acts of service, others come to know that you, we, are willing to stop, listen, care, and help. There are people in our lives who need to know we care.

- Inspired by Tony Dungy (Uncommon, 98-99)

Today and every day we need to tell ourselves we can serve others. Today and every day we need to remind ourselves serving others is worth it. And do you know what will happen? We will be the Church that serves.

I would like to close with the lyrics of a Casting Crowns song entitled "Start Right Here" ...

We want our coffee in the lobby... We watch our worship on a screen...
We got a Rockstar preacher... Who won't wake us from our dreams...
We want our blessings in our pockets... We keep our missions overseas...
But for the hurting in our cities... Would we even cross the street?

But we wanna see the heart set free and the tyrants kneel
The walls fall down and our land be healed
But church if we want to see a change in the world out there
It's got to start right here, It's got to start right now

I'm like the brother of the prodigal... Who turned his nose and puffed his chest...
He didn't run off like his brother... But his soul was just as dead...
What if the church on Sunday... Was still the church on Monday too...
What if we came down from our towers... And walked a mile in someone's shoes?

We're the people who are called by His name...
If we'll surrender all our pride and turn from our ways
He (God) will hear from Heaven and forgive our sin...
He (God) will heal our land but it starts right here...

Do we wanna see the heart set free and the tyrants kneel, the walls fall down and our land be healed? Then Church, if we want to see a change in the world out there it's got to start right here, it's got to start right now!!!

Let all God's people say... Amen.