

Text: [Matthew 25:31-46](#)
Date: March 31, 2019 – Lent 4
Title: “Service”
Theme: We simply don’t know how God will use the things we do to make a difference in others’ lives.

Intro

As we’ve gone through Lent, I’m excited to see the level of participation in our Disciples’ Path small groups
I have been sitting in on the Thursday evening session and we’ve had some great conversation
And that’s exactly the point – to learn from each other

I hope if you haven’t had the opportunity to take part this Lent, that you’ll reach out to Kathleen or me, gather a group of friends together when it’s convenient for you, and lead this study
Our goal was to make this easy enough that anyone can lead it, anytime
And our hope is to keep developing these resources for small groups, particularly in connection with sermon series
So that we always have relevant curriculum available for you

Today, we’re focusing on another dimension of our membership vows – this week we’re talking about service

Question

Who taught you the importance of giving back?

Sermon

1

There are days when you really wonder whether anything you do is making a difference
Have you ever gone through that kind of a period of questioning?

Now, I know, you’ll say – you’re a pastor and you think that?
Well, first of all, sometimes, yes – that happens to me too

I think it happens to all of us
No matter whether you're working up here, with big ideas for changing the world, even if you've got power, money or influence to make them happen
Or whether you are working down here, directly with people, one-to-one, on the front lines of helping folks everyday
We all want to know: are we making a difference?

And it's ironic – those working up here can lose sight of their impact because they don't see the faces
And those working down here can feel like all they're doing is putting a band-aid on a problem
No one ever seems to be in a place to see how what they do helps in the bigger picture

Now layer in another truth we've got to reckon with
The world's problems are big – so much bigger than anyone can think about solving
So I don't care if you're Bill Gates, giving away billions of dollars
Or head of the Red Cross or another aid organization
I don't care if you're the Secretary-General of the UN
Or the President of the United States
I don't care if you're the best surgeon in the world, doing miraculous works of healing
Or a teacher, working with the most under-served populations

It doesn't matter
If you really take seriously the suffering of the world, there will be days when you will look at what you have to offer and say,
"It doesn't seem like enough"
"I don't know if I'm making a difference"

2

Think about it
I mean, the number of people living in poverty
People dying for lack of food, water, health care
People living surrounded by conflict
Whole nations suffering under brutal dictatorships

Anyone who takes seriously what it means to follow Jesus
We care about these things
We care that people are suffering

And no matter how hard we work
No matter how much money we spend
No matter how many hours we give
No matter even how much we pray
It doesn't feel like much more than a teardrop in an ocean of suffering

3

Jesus told a story to his disciples
About what it would be like at the end of the world, when he returns
He talked about a Great Judgment, when "all the nations" will be gathered

And he will separate people from one another, as a shepherd separates
sheep from goats
The sheep he will put on his right hand, and the goats on the left
The right hand being the hand of blessing, in scripture terms

And he will say to those who are on the right:
"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared
for you from the foundation of the world"

Now what, do you think, these folks had done in order to deserve entrance
into the kingdom?

Had they invented a vaccine with the potential to save millions of lives?
Had they fought to secure justice for people of every race?
Had they led people of different faiths on a path toward peace?

No, actually. None of those things.

What Jesus actually boils it down to is this:

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me
something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was
naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me."

We look at that list –
Feeding the hungry
Giving water to the thirsty
Welcoming the stranger
Clothing the naked
Caring for the sick
Visiting the prisoner

And we say, that's not really earth-shaking, that kind of service
It feels kind of like small ball

Am I not meant to use my skills in bigger ways?
Well, maybe. But then again, maybe not.

Maybe not because I really do believe it's important that we do these things
personally
Not just give money to support those who do them

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached on this idea:
"the reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor is
because they so seldom visit them." ([On Visiting The Sick, Sermon 98](#))

He was getting at an important truth:

It's easier for us to have compassion for those who are different from us –
in any dimension – race, religion, immigration status, sexual
orientation

When we spend time with people face-to-face
When we serve among them in whatever small way we can

4

That's an important point Jesus is making through his list of ways to serve
We can easily despair because we can't make a dent in the world's
problems

If we step back and are honest with ourselves, though, sometimes we can't
even make a dent in ONE person's problems

Have you ever started to help someone, thinking they just needed a little
encouragement and maybe a little tangible help to get on the right
track,

And then found out that the challenges they face are a lot bigger than you
thought?

It happens, and when it happens, then YOU can feel like a failure
And it can discourage you from being willing to serve
From being willing to step up and help

But I want to make another point from the scripture – really the most
important point
It's impossible for us to know what kind of difference we're really making
through our service
We probably won't EVER know

5

Want to know why I say that?
Look again at this vision Jesus shares
Those at Jesus' right hand – those who are blessed because they have
blessed someone else – they're confused.

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or
thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw
you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you
clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited
you?' (Matthew 25:37-39)

They're kind of confused as to why Jesus is calling them blessed
Why Jesus is celebrating them. They don't even remember what they did!

They've gone through life, doing their thing, trying to help someone else
along the way
And maybe they felt exactly the way we feel sometimes:
"I don't know if it really makes any difference"

What I hear Jesus saying here is: you just don't know.
You just don't know what kind of difference you are making.

Every once in a while you may get a glimpse
You may run into someone from another part of your life, a long time ago
Who will say, "Do you remember when you did this for me?"
And honestly, if you're really living the way Jesus teaches us to live

You may not even remember – because you were just being yourself and
doing what came naturally in that moment
But later when someone reminds you of what you did for them, you learn
that your help, your service, your prayers, your encouragement
They made a real difference

None of us can ever have enough smarts, enough resources, enough time
or energy to solve every problem the world faces
Fortunately, that's not our measure of success

This is: Jesus says, “when you did this for the least of these members of
my family, you did it for me”
Are we willing to offer what we have every day by living faithfully?
By offering what we have?
By giving what we can?
By helping where we are able?

The world gets better – more just, more fair, more kind – not always
through grand plans and ideas
But through a trillion simple acts of service
Taking seriously our responsibility toward the people who cross our path
Our responsibility to see Jesus in them
And then to serve and love them as Jesus served and loved us

On the days when you feel like, “I don't know what kind of a difference I'm
making” –
Remember this: you're right.
You DON'T know.

Amen.

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