

Service With a Smile Sunday, 8/7/22

Is there anyone here who woke up this morning and thought about God's purpose for your life today? That's not something that most of us normally do. When I roll out of bed on a Sunday morning, I make a beeline for the coffee pot, review the sermon and the rest of the worship plan for the morning, have breakfast, shower and get dressed, and then off I go, usually praying on my way to church. Seldom do I ever pause to wonder why I'm doing what I do- I just do it.

I imagine that most of us are the same way. The timing of our routines might differ, but most of us simply wake up and do what needs to be done. We all have to-do lists filled with things we have to do and want to do, and our days are filled with adding and subtracting from those lists that concern our obligations to ourselves, our families, our employers, and our communities. That will probably never change as long as we're living, but one thing that can change is the way we prioritize those lists and our attitudes in working through them.

I wonder how our lives might be different if we allowed God to interrupt the routines and the urgent demands of life long enough for us to ponder the question, "How can I serve others today, in the name of Jesus?" God's very nature is one of self-giving for the sake of others, and as God's children, we're called to follow God's example.

Next month you'll be receiving a letter in the mail introducing our fall stewardship worship series, 5G, and asking you to think about, pray about, and respond to the various ways you can grow as a steward of this life that God has given you. A crucial part of our stewardship is using our giftedness in the service to others, so we'll be talking about service today, and again next month. But don't wait until then to be seeking God's leading and intentionally forming a plan for service. Hopefully today's worship will help you hear from God so that by the time September rolls around, you'll be ready to lean into serving others for God with your whole heart.

What does "service" mean? In some restaurants, we're served by a professional food server. When our internet connection is knocked out by a storm, we complain that we don't have any service. When we come to worship on Sunday morning, we say we're attending a church service. When a person enlists in a branch of the military, we thank them for their

service. And when pastors get together, we introduce ourselves by saying we serve a particular community. Clearly, service can mean many things, even in a church context.

When the word service comes up in worship, it often refers to a long checklist of the various tasks and ministries that comprise the life of the church, a great many of which are required to keep the lights on and make the basic ministries of worship and Christian discipleship happen. If you've been around here or just about any other church for any length of time, you've seen those checklists. I want to challenge you to think more broadly about service today, because each of us has a need to find our place in God's Kingdom where we can serve not only the local church, but also the whole of God's creation.

Don't get me wrong, the tasks and ministries on the checklists are crucial to the life of our church, and we'll roll those out for you in early September. We still need your gifts of service in leading the church, in teaching and mentoring our children and youth, in mowing the lawn, in ushering and greeting, in reading the Bible in church, in working the video and sound boards, and in so many other ways. But our call to service also includes serving our brothers and sisters in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and in more distant places as well.

Consider this list offered by Jesus in Matthew 25, in which he echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah. I'm reading from The Message paraphrase, beginning with verse 31 **{Read Matthew 25:31-40, MSG}**

I don't especially like this list that Jesus left us. It makes me uncomfortable. Why? Because I haven't fed very many hungry people or given a drink to many thirsty people. Like most of us, I've done these things in fits and starts, perhaps in an occasional ministry event that's been scheduled. I think that over twenty years I've only made three visits to someone in prison. I've met quite a few homeless people over the last twenty years of ministry, but it's only been a very few of them that I've managed to find a temporary room for, and I've never offered a homeless person one of my own rooms. I've given clothing to a handful of people who needed something to wear, but more often than not, the clothes that no longer fit me have been dropped off at a Salvation Army drive through. As a pastor, I've visited many sick people. Would I have visited as many if I wasn't a paid minister?

I know that there are an endless number of rationalizations and excuses I could offer to explain my lack of service to the poor, hungry, and homeless. I could say that I've served these people metaphorically, or served them indirectly through my giving, or I've been called to serve my family first, or any number of other excuses and half-truths. The truth is, all too often I've let my service to myself crowd out my service to other people. Nameless, voiceless, out-of-sight people are easy to ignore. Occasionally a homeless encampment like this one in Minneapolis hits the headlines for one reason or another, but it's usually quickly forgotten, at least by me. Is there any way for people like me, and perhaps like you, to grow in faithfully serving God by serving other people? And can we do it with joy, serving with a smile?

Most of us have some realistic constraints on the time and energy that's available to us. Most of us have jobs, many of us have small children to care for, many of us have health or mobility limitations. But all of us can take at least one small step in a particular way in serving others. Some of the lowest hanging fruit for serving others is right here in the ministries of our church and the Buffalo community. Here are some ideas for you: Deliver meals this month for Meals on Wheels. Volunteer at the Buffalo Food Shelf or Love Inc. Knit a prayer shawl or donate a blanket. Serve grieving people through our funeral meals ministry or join the Congregational Care Team and support hurting people with encouraging cards and calls. And yes, your prayer and your financial giving does matter to all these ministries, including your apportionment dollars that support UMCOR and a multitude of other ministries. But I want to challenge you, if you're physically able, to personally engage at least one service ministry and see if God doesn't bless you ten times over. What's one new, concrete way that you can serve in the coming year that represents a small step of growth in your service of others in the name of Jesus? Better yet, is there a way for you to serve with a friend? Or perhaps you'll make a new friend while you serve!

I'm so excited about some of the new ways to serve that we'll be offering you on Wednesday evenings this fall, including what we've been calling "Meals and Missions" nights, when we'll periodically gather all ages together to share a meal and then participate in a hands-on mission project. There will also be new opportunities to share in the discipleship of our youth, as we launch a new Wednesday evening middle school youth

group alongside our regular senior high youth group and host periodic game nights. If you're excited about serving in any of these Wednesday night programs this fall, even just occasionally, now is the right time to be talking to Debbie Bishop, Andrea Gravley, Jana Knutson, or Jana Reinhart to get in on the ground floor.

Stewardship messages shouldn't be about making ourselves feel bad because of what we haven't done. On the other hand, they can remind us that we are more abundantly gifted than we are typically aware, and that Jesus has laid out some pretty clear expectations about the ways in which we are to use our gifts to bless others. God didn't create us to rest forever in our favorite, most comfortable chairs. We were created to serve others, not at a minimum but extravagantly, sacrificially, and joyfully, after the example of Jesus. How many of us here today would agree that any service we've joyfully given to others in the name of Jesus has always enlarged our hearts and added joy to our lives?

Your challenge this week is to look around at the needs of our church, your school, your neighborhood, and our world. You might see something on Facebook, in the BUMC Weekly Connection, or even on the street as you're walking or driving by. When you see someone in need, ask yourself this: Could I be the one God is calling to help?

I sometimes wonder if simply having the eyes to see and the ears to hear is enough to constitute God's call on our lives. What might happen in your life if you started acting in small ways when God prompted you like that? What might happen to our church, our neighborhoods, and the world? When we respond to God's call to serve, not reluctantly but with joy, we can become the change that's needed in our own lives and the lives of others.

Please take some time now to reflect on your life of service. What are the gifts you have and how will you share them?



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