

NOW IS THE TIME TO VOLUNTEER JANUARY 10 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
M. KENT MILLARD

This is our second message in our *NOW IS THE TIME* sermon series. Today we are having the OPEN HOUSE for all of the volunteer ministry opportunities available at St. Luke's so I will be talking about NOW IS THE TIME TO VOLUNTEER.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus talks about the importance of giving our lives in voluntary service for others.

Read Mark 10:35-45: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

WHOEVER WISHES TO BECOMED GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT, AND WHOEVER WISHES TO BE FIRST AMONG YOU MUST BE SERVANT OF ALL. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

PRAYER

Last week I visited Fox Hill Elementary school to see some of our volunteer tutors and mentors in action. I went to several different classrooms and saw adults with a badge pinned to their clothes which read: St. Luke's Volunteer.

In each case the St. Luke's volunteer was sitting on a short grade school chair with one, two or three children around them reading to the adult mentor or the mentor was helping them with their homework.

In one room I visited a man from our congregation that I hadn't met before was helping three little boys with their math problems. I thanked him for being a volunteer and asked him how he liked it. He told me that helping these three boys with their math was something he looked forward to every week. He

told me that he would take off a little early from work every Tuesday and come to the school and he said that he knew he got more out of it than he gave. I could tell that these little boys were relishing having the attention of a male mentor.

As I was leaving the school one of the administrators came up to me and thanked me profusely for all of the St. Luke's volunteers who are making such a positive difference for students in that school.

Then she told me that recently one little girl had written a thank you note to her mentor which read: I'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER AND YOU WILL ALWAYS BE IN MY HEART. DON'T EVER LEAVE ME.

When children write notes like this to an adult volunteer, you know more than just helping with homework is taking place. A relationship of care and compassion has developed which inspires love and gratitude in the heart of a little girl and will have a lifelong impact on her.

Last summer on Service Saturday in August, about 350 St. Luke's volunteers went out into the community to give voluntary service to about 15 different community organizations. About 100 of those volunteers went to Fox Hill School to help the teachers and administrators get ready for the children to come back to school in the fall. One of those teachers wrote this note to Jayne Thorne, our Director of Outreach Ministries and to Julie and Wendy Sommers members of St. Luke's who initiated our conversations with Fox Hill School and to Sharon Wilkins, our Coordinator of Volunteers.

This teacher wrote:

WOW IS ALL I CAN SAY! ST. LUKE'S VOLUNTEERS ARE UNBELIEVABLE! I WAS JUST IN AWE AND HAD GOOSEBUMPS WITH ALL OF THE POSITIVE WORK GOING ON AT FOX HILL THIS MORNING. THEY ARE THE ANSWERS TO OUR PRAYERS....I WISH EVERY PARENT AT FOX HILL COULD SE HOW MUCH THESE PEOPLE HAVE DONE OUT OF THE GOODNESS OF THEIR HEARTS. GOD IS DEFINITELY IN ACTION AT ST. LUKE'S. I HAD TEARS IN MY EYES THIS MORNING FROM ALL THE GOOD THAT WAS DONE BY ST. LUKE'S VOLUNTEERS. PLEASE TELL THEM, "THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!"

I thank God today for the hundreds of volunteers from St. Luke's who donate their time each week in tutoring or mentoring students, serving food to hungry people at Fletcher Place, teaching children, youth or adults in our Christian education programs, singing or ringing in a music program, ushering or serving coffee on Sunday mornings, welcoming people to worship at the entrances, directing traffic in the parking lot, or going on one of our work mission teams to serve people in this country or overseas.

When I think about the hundreds of hours of volunteer service that hundreds of people in this congregation give every week, I am overwhelmed with awe and gratitude.

I believe that these volunteer servants are the truly great people in the world because they are fulfilling the command and example of Jesus in the text I just read from Mark's Gospel.

Here is the setting. Jesus and his twelve disciples were walking along a road from Galilee to Jerusalem. His disciples believed that when they arrived in Jerusalem Jesus would confront the Jewish and Roman leaders and defeat them by the power of God that they had seen in the life of Jesus. Then they thought that Jesus would set up a new political kingdom where Jesus would be king over the whole nation and the disciples who had followed him faithfully would receive positions of power and influence.

So the brothers James and John got Jesus aside and asked him if they could have the highest positions of power when he became King, if one could sit on his right and one on his left.

Jesus responded by saying that they had no understanding at all of his life and mission in this world. It was not to set up a new political kingdom in one place but establish a kingdom of love, mercy, faith and compassion in the hearts of people all over the world forever.

Then Jesus contrasted the ways of our world with the way of God. He said that in the world we think the great people are those who have power, wealth, influence and authority over other people. In the world we look up to those who are at the top of the economic or political or entertainment or sports ladder as if they are the greatest people in the world.

Then Jesus said that that is not God's way of looking at people. Jesus said that if they wanted to be great in the eyes of God, then they must become the volunteer servants of others rather than their masters, and that the greatest among them would be the volunteer servants of everyone.

Jesus concluded by saying that he himself came not to be served by other people and to dominate other people but to serve other people and to actually give his life for them.

According to Jesus, God measures our lives not by how high we arrive on the political ladder or economic ladder, how much wealth we accumulate, how talented we are on the movie screen or the football field or basketball court or how famous we are. No, according to Jesus, God measures our lives by how much we serve others. God measures our lives by how much compassion, love and care we give to other people. Jesus put it so clearly that no one could misunderstand him. He said simply:

WHOEVER WOULD BE GREAT AMONG YOU WILL BE YOUR SERVANT AND WHOEVER WOULD BE FIRST AMONG YOU WILL BE THE SERVANT OF EVERYONE.

Jesus made it clear that if we want to be great in the eyes of God, then we need to give ourselves in loving service to others.

You may have heard of this analogy of the pyramid before. In our world we see life as a pyramid where everyone is someplace on the pyramid. Some are at the bottom, some in the middle and fewer are at the top of the pyramid. In the world we are always trying to climb higher on the pyramid; climb higher on the corporate ladder, climb higher in government administration, get a higher paid position, or become famous for our talents acting, dancing or singing on television or become a professional athlete.

We regularly see lists of the wealthiest people in the world as if simply being wealthy is the ultimate goal of life.

In South Dakota, the highest city in the state is Lead, S. D. located in the Black Hills which is a mile above sea level. Once the pastor of the United Methodist Church in Lead told me that he was the highest paid pastor in the state. He lived in the highest city in the state and he was paid so he considered himself the highest paid pastor in the state.

We often think that the highest paid person in our company or organization or in the nation or world is the greatest person or the most important person around.

However, Jesus said that God does not look at it this way. God looks at life as an inverted pyramid- a pyramid turned upside down. In an inverted pyramid as you move closer to the peak, more people are above you and you see yourself as one who is here to serve them.

The greatest persons among us are the ones closest to the peak of an inverted pyramid where they serve the greatest number of people above them.

This is what Jesus meant when he said that “whoever would be first among you would see themselves as the servant of everyone.”

From God’s point of view we can have lots of wealth, power and fame and give ourselves in humble service to others or we can be unemployed or have very little and be a humble servant of others. From God’s point of view our status or what we possess is not the point. From God’s point of view what really matters is how we love and serve others from whatever position we find ourselves in.

And this amazing truth about life is that when we give ourselves in loving service to others, we will discover a deep satisfaction seeping into our lives.

Recently, I read a book entitled *WHY GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE* by Dr. STEPHEN POST AND JILL NEIMARK. It is a book that reports on scientific studies which show that there are life-enhancing benefits to volunteering, caring, kindness and compassion.

I was shocked at some of the amazing studies which showed the long term positive benefits to caring for other people.

One of the most famous studies was a study of 200 people that began when they were teenagers in the 1920s. This same group of people was studied extensively in every decade of their lives. Every ten years each person would be interviewed by professional clinicians about everything from family to work, health, leisure, volunteer activities, personal interests and social and political attitudes.

Recently a researcher conducted new interviews with the 180 people of that group who are still alive. They made these amazing discoveries.

They discovered that those who started volunteering to help other people when they were in high school and continued it throughout their lives were more successful throughout their lives, were more spiritual, were physically healthier, had better social skills, and experience more fulfillment in their family lives.

Dr. Paul Wink from Wellesley College who conducted this study concluded that volunteering should be especially encouraged among teenagers because it will then become a pattern for their lives which will bring them greater life satisfaction in practically every area of life.

In 2005 the American College Health Association surveyed more than 47,000 students and found that 45% of them said they became so depressed at times they could hardly function and that 10% of them had seriously considered suicide in the past year.

But they also discovered that teenagers who volunteered to help others did better in life. They had higher grades in school, used drugs and alcohol less, had lower teenage pregnancy rates and generally felt better about themselves than those youth who did no volunteer work for anyone else.

Last week one of our youth workers said that if they could get a junior high or senior high student to go on a work project where they spend a week helping someone else, it will be the most life transforming experience in that young person's life. You see, so often our young people are totally consumed in social contacts, texting and talking to their friends about other friends, school and how to have a good time.

However, when one of these young people spends a week in service to people in severe need where they don't have enough food to eat or a decent house to live in, it gives them a whole new perspective on life. And when young people volunteer during their teenage years it sets a pattern for their lives which will bring them greater meaning and joy in throughout their lives.

If we want teenagers to volunteer to help someone else, then we as parents and grandparents need to model volunteering in our own lives. The young people around us will follow our example.

Volunteering is good for us at the other end of the life scale as well.

In 2005 researchers at Stanford University conducted a study of 7,500 adults over age 60 for a period of six years. They discovered that voluntarily helping and serving someone else was a significant predictor of how long they would live.

They discovered that those who volunteered regularly had a 44% reduction in their mortality rate than non-volunteers. They concluded that when older people volunteer it has a bigger effect on how long they will live than physical mobility or exercising four times a week.

Volunteering, reaching out and caring for other people can help us live longer and feel better about ourselves in the process!

Another study in Baltimore, Maryland interviewed 70 active older volunteers who tutored or mentored school children. About a year later they interviewed the same group again and discovered that their physical abilities, strength, and mental alertness had actually significantly increased during the year that they were volunteering.

Those 70 volunteers felt physically better than non-volunteers and they had better emotional and spiritual health and felt better about themselves.

Dr. Stephen Post concludes that good things happen to good people because when we are good, compassionate, generous, forgiving, and willing to volunteer our time to help someone else, good things happen to us physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally.

I have always known that doing good to others makes us feel good as well, but I had not known that there were so many scientific studies that demonstrate that fact.

Jesus said that whoever would be great among us will be a servant but he could have also said that whoever would be healthy, happy, and hopeful among us will be a servant who volunteers their time to help someone else.

Among the top ten New Year's resolutions made every year by Americans, is the resolution to volunteer more in our religious community or in other community organizations during the new year.

So I want to say to all of us: NOW IS THE TIME; IF NOT NOW WHEN; IF NOT US WHO?

I know that we can always find reasons or excuses to put off volunteering. I am too busy. I already have too much on my plate. I will do it someday but not now. However, some day it will be too late and we may be unable to do it and we will look back on our lives and say to ourselves: I always intended to volunteer to help others but I just never got around to actually doing it.

I would like to invite each of us to do a mental assessment right now. Think about how much of your time you are currently volunteering to do something good for someone else for which you are not paid.

Are you volunteering some of your time to serve on a church or community board which serves the needs of a segment of our community? Last year we did a survey and discovered that dozens and dozens of the members of St. Luke's donate their time, talent and treasure to serve on community service organizations, schools, or other community building groups. I thank God for your volunteering to serve other people without pay.

In my own life, I discover that is one of the ways I volunteer my service. I volunteer service as chair of the Interfaith Hunger Initiative, as chair of a Charter School board, as chair of the Finance Committee for the Indiana Annual Conference, as a member of the Rotary Service Organization and I just completed two terms of service on the University Of Indianapolis Board Of Trustees.

I know that many of you volunteer your service through serving on boards like these or on our congregation's boards and committees and that is also deeply appreciated.

However, serving on boards or committees can sometimes feel like a step removed from direct service to the people we serve. So I like to go on church work projects or serve food to the hungry where I can experience hands on service to people in need and I would encourage you all to do the same.

You can experience personal hands on volunteering through teaching children, youth or adults here, mentoring children at Fox Hill or other schools, participating in a music group, or one of the many other service opportunities you will find as you visit the various ministry groups this morning.

Dr. Stephen Post tells this story in his book, *WHY GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE*.

During World War Two there were hundreds of non- Jews who volunteered their time and money and energy to rescue Jews from persecution by the Nazis by hiding them in their homes or helping them to escape Nazi Europe. They volunteered their life saving efforts at great personal risk to themselves. Many were discovered to be protecting Jews and were sent to concentration camps where they died.

The movie *Schindler's List* is the story of one German businessman who voluntarily saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews by employing them in his factories and keeping them out of the concentration camps.

Many years after the war was over, some researchers did a survey of 85 people who risked their lives to save Jewish people as well as a similar number of people from those same communities who did nothing during the Holocaust to help Jewish people escape persecution and death.

The researchers did extensive interviews of these two groups about their lives and their feelings of meaning and satisfaction.

They made some interesting discoveries.

The persons who volunteered their time and energy to save Jews even at the risk of their own lives scored significantly higher than the bystanders on social responsibility in caring for the needs of others, empathy, risk-taking and autonomy.

But they also discovered that the rescuers also reported a far higher degree of satisfaction with their current lives and much higher levels of joy and fulfillment in family and friendships than did those who were simply bystanders during a time of crisis.

Think about that! Those who gave their time, love and energy to rescue Jews in a time of crisis lived the rest of their lives with a greater sense of fulfillment, joy and meaning than those who stood on the sidelines and did nothing to help others whose lives were at risk.

Those who dive in to help others in their times of need, live the rest of their lives far more fulfilled than those who are simply bystanders and stand on the sidelines of life never lifting a finger to help someone else.

Now we are not in a crisis like the Holocaust but children in our midst are facing a crisis in getting a good education in schools throughout our community. We read about the crisis in education every day in our newspapers.

We are also in a crisis with increasing numbers of people unemployed and the increasing number of families with mothers, fathers and children who are homeless and hungry.

There are people in need all around us and today we have a choice. We can simply be bystanders like the bystanders during the Holocaust and simply focus on ourselves and our families and our pleasures or we can become part of the compassionate community in this world of people who volunteer their time, talent and treasure to make a personal difference in the life of someone else.

I recently heard it put this way. TO THE WORLD YOU MAY BE JUST ONE PERSON, BUT TO ONE PERSON YOU ARE THE WORLD.

When we volunteer we can make a world of difference in the life of someone else.

The truth is that when we volunteer to serve someone else we not only make a positive difference in the lives of the people we serve but in the very act of serving others, we also make a positive difference in our own lives in terms of life fulfillment, satisfaction, meaning and purpose.

As Dr. Stephen Post puts it: Good things happen to those who do good in this world.

Jesus put it simply: "Whoever would be great among you will be a servant among you." It is also true that "whoever would be fulfilled, whoever would experience spiritual, mental, physical and emotional health will be a servant among you."

Today I invite you to move out of the spectator stands - to stop being a bystander in life and to get into the game of life. Volunteer some of your time, talent and treasure to serving the needs of others and you will leave this world a better place than you found it and find joy and meaning in the process.

Let us pray.