

DO ALL THE GOOD YOU CAN AUGUST 1 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
M. KENT MILLARD

Last week we talked about taking time off during the summer to relax, renew and laugh.

Today I want us to think about taking time off this summer to volunteer to serve people in need.

Jesus made it clear that his followers were to see themselves as servants of others. In Mark's Gospel Jesus told his disciples specifically that he came, not to be served by others, but to serve other people and each of his followers is to be a servant of others as well. Here is how Mark tells the story in chapter 10, verses 42-45:

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 WOULD BE GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT.

The author of the letter of James made a similar point when he said that it is not enough to simply claim faith in God but our faith has to be demonstrated in acts of love, mercy and service. Here is how James puts it in chapter 2, verses 14-17:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

SO FAITH BY ITSELF, IF IT HAS NO WORKS (MEANING GOOD WORKS) IS DEAD.

PRAYER

Quaker author Richard Foster once wrote a book entitled *CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE*. It is a book about the joy of practicing the spiritual disciplines and one of the key books which has most influenced my own spiritual journey.

When Foster talks about the spiritual discipline of service he makes a distinction between simply choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. Let me explain.

On the one hand, when we choose how and when and where we will serve, we are still in charge, we are the boss and we only serve in ways of our own choosing.

On the other hand, when we choose to be a servant, we surrender ourselves to God and God is in charge of our serving and we serve wherever the need is, whether it is what we would have chosen for ourselves or not. When we define ourselves as a servant and surrender ourselves to God then God is in charge of where we serve.

When we choose to serve, we are in charge of our service and when we choose to be a servant, we surrender the decision to God and serve wherever God calls us to serve.

During this past Lent we had a Saturday morning Lent spiritual retreat where we talked about the spiritual discipline of serving others.

I talked about how Jesus calls us all to become servants and Richard Foster's distinction between choosing where we want to serve and surrendering the decision to God and serving wherever needed.

We had arranged two different service projects to do during that retreat: one was to make blankets for our Haiti mission and the other was to prepare the sanctuary for Sunday worship by cleaning out all the stuff we leave in the pew holders each Sunday and vacuuming the sanctuary floors.

Now, I realized that, if I choosing for myself, I would choose the outward focused mission outreach project for Haiti as my preference rather than the internal service of cleaning up the Sanctuary.

However, I told the group about Foster's distinction between choosing to serve where we wanted to and surrendering the decision to God and serving wherever God needed us.

Then, I suggested to the group that rather than allowing any of us to choose where we would serve, we would just number off into two different groups and each group would simply be assigned to one of the projects randomly.

It would be a way to humbly surrender ourselves to God and serve where the need was rather than choosing where we might serve.

Wouldn't you know, I wound up in the group cleaning the sanctuary, which would not have been my first choice? My assignment was to vacuum. But I didn't get to vacuum the important main sanctuary carpet where people could see what I had done. No, I was assigned to vacuum up the dead ladybugs in the hallway behind these organ pipes. This meant that I would clean up an area that very few people ever even see and few would notice after it was done.

So I spent an hour vacuuming up the dead ladybugs in a hallway usually used only by the worship leaders on Sunday morning.

As I did that it was a good lesson for me in practicing what I preach. It caused me to simply surrender to God and do what was needed whether it was what I wanted to do or not. It was a good lesson in humbly surrendering to God and serving wherever I was needed.

In the text I just read from Mark's Gospel, Jesus told his followers that they should not seek to be in control over other people but instead should seek to be servants of others.

Jesus put it this way: WHOEVER WISHES TO BECOME GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT...AND THAT HE HIMSELF CAME NOT TO BE SERVED BY OTHER PEOPLE BUT TO SURRENDER HIMSELF AS A LOVING SERVANT OF OTHER PEOPLE.

Later in his life, Jesus modeled what a loving servant looks like when he gathered his disciples together for a last supper before his crucifixion. Do you remember how he took a towel and a basin of water and

went around and knelt before each of his disciples and washed and dried their feet? He surrendered himself to God, took on the role of a humble servant, doing the task that was needed and called his followers to do the same.

Today I would like to invite all of us to think about how we will surrender our will and our ego to God and become servants who serve wherever God calls us.

When Jesus demonstrated humble servant-hood by washing and drying his disciples' feet, it reminded me of this illustration with a towel.

When we come to God in worship, it is as if we are hungry for spiritual food and we want to be fed. We put the towel on as a bib because we are starving for spiritual food and nourishment and need to be fed and filled full to overflowing with the amazing grace and steadfast love of God. So whenever we come to worship it is as if we have a bib on and are seeking to be fed by God. And God is faithful to us and when we come with open hearts and minds, God feeds, forgives, cleanses, and blesses us with his loving living presence.

When we come for communion it is as if we are coming with a bib on to be fed spiritually and personally by the love of Christ for each of us.

However, that is not the end of the story. After we have been fed by God, and we leave this place to go back into the world we take the towel off our necks and put it on our arms like a waiter in a restaurant and go out and become servants of others. We surrender ourselves to God and serve wherever God might call us.

You see, we come to be fed and nourished by the presence of God and then God sends us out into the world as servants of others. My prayer each Sunday is that we will all experience the living presence of God in this service healing, blessing and filling us and then that we will go into the world and allow God to use us in healing, blessing and filling others.

Jesus said: "Whoever would be great among you will be your servant."

The letter of James tells us that faith in God which does not express itself in serving others is a dead or non-living faith. Faith without good works of love and compassion is meaningless.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, also called us to express our faith through the good actions of our lives.

John Wesley once put it this way:

DO ALL THE GOOD YOU CAN, BY ALL THE MEANS YOU CAN, IN ALL THE PLACES YOU CAN, AT ALL THE TIMES YOU CAN, TO ALL THE PEOPLE YOU CAN, AS LONG AS EVER YOU CAN.

And John Wesley demonstrated that principle in his own life. He poured out his life in sharing God's Good News with the poor, the orphaned, the uneducated and he gave himself constantly in caring for the needs of others.

The story is told that just a few weeks before his death at the age of 88, John Wesley was seen walking in a poor section of London in the rain delivering food and love to families in need. I tried to imagine this frail older man spending his last days on earth as a servant of the poor.

Wesley lived up to his motto of doing all the good you can to all the people you can as long as you can.

Notice the collage of pictures on the screen of St. Luke's people giving themselves in loving service to others as an illustration of fulfilling John Wesley's words to do all the good we can.

I thank God for the generous way that so many of the people of St. Luke's give themselves in loving service to the needs of others. As you look at that picture you will notice pictures of young people at work on various mission projects.

Our Junior High youth went on a work project mission trip to Tennessee this summer and about 25 people from our congregation went on a mission trip with their children and grandchildren to the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota.

Our daughter-in-law, Katherine Millard, took two of their girls, our granddaughters, Madison and MacKenzie, on the Rosebud mission trip to South Dakota where they spent a week working with the Tree of Life Mission of the United Methodist Church.

When they got back I asked him how they liked the trip and their first response was: "Everything is so bare in South Dakota; there are no trees." If you have ever been to the Dakotas you notice that there are no trees to get in the way of the scenery; it is a place where you can see the horizon from one side to the other and there are no mountains or trees to get in the way.

I asked my granddaughters what they did on the reservation and they told me about doing crafts in a youth center with Native American children. I have been there and know that many of these children live in large families with a grandmother because they didn't know where their parents are and they sometimes don't have enough to eat at their homes.

When I was there a couple of years ago with two of our grandchildren, we provided lunch for children before a vacation church school program. We gave them sandwiches and one little child ate half of his sandwich and put the other half in his pocket. We asked him why, and he explained that he wanted to take the other half sandwich home to his mother so she would have something to eat that day. We explained that he could eat his whole sandwich and we would give him some more sandwiches to take home for his mother and brothers and sisters.

Sometimes children and youth can grow up only thinking about themselves and what they want to buy and what they want to wear. But when children go on a work project with other teenagers or with their parents or grandparents, it makes a profound change in their lives. They discover that there are many children their age in this world who do not have all the blessings and opportunities they have.

I think that mission opportunities whether they are local or someplace else in the nation make a profound impact on the children and youth in our congregation and help them to become more compassionate followers of Jesus.

One of our greatest concerns as parents and grandparents is to help our children and grandchildren not get involved with the wrong friends who might lead them into self destructive activities. We know that as children and youth grow up, the friends they choose have a profound impact on the decisions they make.

One of the best ways to help children and youth find fulfilling lives and make good decisions is by bringing them to worship, Sunday school and youth groups where they can make friends with other young people and youth leaders who will be a positive influence in their lives.

Later on this month we will start our church school program and youth ministries and I encourage you to enroll your young people in these programs where they can grow spiritually and develop compassion for people in need around the world.

On the screen the people in the blue shirts are serving food to people in need at Fletcher Place Community center in downtown Indianapolis, the people in green shirts are working on wheelchair ramps which we talked about last Sunday and the people in red shirts were on our Servant Day projects last August.

Jesus said, "Whoever would be great among you will be your servant," and these are some of the great people in our midst who have been participating in various missions. Next Saturday, August 7, we will give everyone in our congregation an opportunity to be great by participating in Servant Day. We meet here at the church at 8 am for breakfast and then go out to be servants in our community for three hours.

There are 10 different service projects and I hope you will decide to surrender yourself to God and serve wherever you are needed.

You may serve at one of our Washington Township Schools, either Fox Hill Elementary or Nora Elementary in helping teachers and administrators get their schools ready for the onslaught of students later this month.

You may serve in helping some of the Burmese refugee families who have been resettled in the Nora area over the past couple of years.

You may become a servant of people with disabilities either at the School for the Blind or at the St. Vincent Group home for persons with handicapping conditions.

You may help support the Julian Center for abused families by serving at their used clothing store called Thrifty Threads, you may serve at one of our community centers or you may serve right here at St. Luke's.

You can sign up for any of these areas of service in the West Passage after worship today.

We will first of all make a decision to be a servant, we make that decision here, and then we go wherever God calls us and our family to serve next Saturday morning.

The truth about life is that when we give ourselves in loving service to others, we are blessed in the process.

Cami Walker is a young woman in Los Angeles, California who was a hard-working business executive engaged to be married. She and her husband Mark were married in 2006 and they both thought that life would be just perfect for them.

However, one month after they were married, Cami noticed that her hands and arms were numb and that she had difficulty speaking. She went to a doctor for extensive tests and discovered that she had Multiple Sclerosis which is a progressive disease of the central nervous system for which there is no cure. The doctors told her that it would get progressively worse and she would not be able to walk on her own, remember things clearly or function normally in life.

Over the next year, Cami discovered what they told her was coming true and sometimes she was unable to get out of bed in the morning, or walk, or remember things and that she was extremely fatigued all the time.

One day she was very depressed so she called a spiritual friend of hers, a woman from South Africa, who was a spiritual leader. Cami explained to her friend all the terrible things which were happening to her and her friend responded by saying: "CAMI, I THINK YOU HAVE TO STOP THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF." Cami was shocked; she was in almost constant pain, could not work anymore, and could hardly get around. She said, "What do you mean: stop thinking about myself?"

Her spiritual friend told her: "IF YOU SPEND ALL OF YOUR TIME AND ENERGY FOCUSING ON YOUR PAIN, YOU'RE FEEDING THE DISEASE AND MAKING IT WORSE. YOU ARE FALLING INTO BLACK HOLE AND HERE IS THE WAY OUT. I WANT YOU TO GIVE AWAY 29 GIFTS TO OTHERS IN 29 DAYS, FROM A HEART OF LOVE AND WRITE IT DOWN IN A JOURNAL."

Cami couldn't believe what she was hearing from her friend. She thought: "I'm in pain and I can't walk and you are telling me that doing something kind for someone else and writing it down will make me better, you've got to be kidding."

A few days later, Cami thought about the advice from her friend and decided that she would try it. She decided to call another friend, Lauri, who also is struggling with MS. It just so happened that the time she called Lauri's husband was out of town and she was feeling lonely and was extremely delighted to receive a call from Cami. They talked for an hour about life and about coping with their disease; they even laughed together and when the call was over Cami said she was smiling for the first time in a long time and felt calmer and more peaceful.

She wrote down in her journal what had just happened and wondered if the calmness and peace she felt came directly from offering the gift of listening and compassion for Lauri.

Cami started practicing giving gifts away to friends and strangers on the street. She began each day with a meditation in which she would say: Today I will give with joy or today I will give with love. Then she would think about someone to give a gift to or simply go out into the world and give to whoever she encountered.

Once she was walking along a street with her cane and her friends support when they came to some teenagers rapping and dancing on the sidewalk. They stopped to watch for awhile and were impressed

with how good these street dancers were. At the end Cami gave one of the young men the only money she had which was a \$5 bill and he was ecstatic.

She continued to meditate each morning on the attitude with which we would give each day, give a gift to someone and then write about it in her journal.

To her surprise, her life has improved dramatically. She still has MS and suffers with fatigue and other symptoms sometimes but she has many more days of feeling better and sharing love with others. She continues to give gifts every day and records them on a 29 day cycle.

She has written a book about her experience entitled: *29 GIFTS; HOW A MONTH OF GIVING CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE* and she has been featured on television shows.

We have invited Cami to come to speak to us in October and to share her insights about the healing power of generosity and gift giving.

I think Cami has rediscovered this truth about life. When we only focus on ourselves and our wants, needs and desires, it chokes our life energy. But when we focus outward and allow God to use us as loving servants of others and reach out and care for them personally, the loving energy of God flows in us and through us into the lives of others. In the process of giving to others we are also blessed.

When we reach out and do all the good we can, we are blessed in the process.

Jesus reached out and healed the sick, fed the hungry and embraced the excluded and the love and energy of God flowed in him and through him so strongly that we now follow him as savior and lord.

When we receive communion, we put on a bib and are fed and filled with the love of God and are called to take the bib and turn it into a servants napkin to share God's love with others.

Let us pray.