

Pathways

Session 8

Vocation through service



Resources for participants

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)

Reflection:

- Have you ever felt like a stranger?
- Describe some of the feeling you may have had?
- How could this passage be easily turned into a teaching of the law?
- What motivates Christian service if Christians are free from the law?

Christian Service

Service is not a list of things that we do, though in it we discover things to do. It is not a code of ethics, but a way of living. To do specific acts of service is not the same thing as living in the Discipline of service. Just as there is more to the game of basketball than the rulebook, there is more to service than specific acts of serving. It is one thing to act like a servant; it is quite another to be a servant. As in all the Disciplines, it is possible to master the mechanics of service without experiencing the Discipline.

To stress the inward nature of service, however is not enough. Service to be service must take form and shape in the world in which we live. Therefore, we must seek to perceive what service looks like in the marketplace of our daily lives.'

[R Foster, Celebration of Discipline. p165]

The difference between servitude and servant hood is the difference between have to and get to. Servitude is imposed from the outside; servanthood grows from an inner identity, a core commitment to do what's best for those I serve.

Jesus' death on the cross illustrates true servanthood. Scripture tells us that he gave up his life for us 'of [his]own accord.' The sinless Son of God freely laid down his life so that we could receive the gift of eternal life – life forever with him.

Jesus loved. And in love, he served. Jesus' followers, in turn, served him and one another with hearts inspired, hearts set ablaze by his love. They served with a heart like Jesus' own heart. Some led and some followed, but all did what they did with servant's hearts.

The motivation for service

A key question relating to service is the question of motivation. Selfless acts of service can be performed for many different reasons by Christians and non-Christians alike. Simply seeing **what** is being done does not indicate **why** it is being done.

Service may be motivated by a sense of care and responsibility for fellow human beings. While this may be based on a number of different motivations, theologically this can be seen as operating from an understanding of God as creator and all human beings as brothers and sisters of God as Father. Within the orders of creation, human beings serve each other in their various areas of responsibility in society.

Service can also be the result of legalistic or moralistic motivation. Individuals can engage in acts of 'service' because they feel that it is their 'Christian duty', or because they feel that in this way they are somehow 'earning God's approval'.

However, for the Christian, the motivation for service arises from theology of the cross as a response to the love and forgiveness of God in Christ.

[Christian Studies Curriculum Framework Theological Notes, p43]

Prayer of St Francis

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Vocation

Before Luther the word vocation (Latin: vocation and German: Beruf) had been applied only to people who had a 'religious vocation', people called to be priests or monks or nuns. Luther challenged that usage and the view of human work it presupposed, that some are doing God's work but others are not. Luther argued that the station of every Christian was a calling from God to serve the needs of our neighbour where we are as we are able. It isn't that we need to serve God separately from our work. We serve God through our service to each other. Luther used the word vocation, therefore to apply to the work and duties of every person. The fish-pickler, the shoemaker, the schoolteacher, the mayor, the street cleaner, the prince, the pastor, the parent, even the student – each of these has a work and a responsibility given to her or him by virtue of this station.

[Tom Christenson, The gift and task of Lutheran Higher Education, p49]

Lutheran schools also need to help you as teachers to explore the various responsibilities of your vocation. The responsibility of teaching or administering is only one area of your vocation. How do you balance this with family, community, church? Do we play these off against each other, or keep them in balance? Do we give people a sense of guilt when they try to divide their time between their various areas of responsibility?

[Malcolm Bartsch, Theology of vocation, SchoolLink 2003]

We often expect a highly spiritual life to include mystical reveries, superhuman virtue, or the possession of a supernatural power that overcomes all obstacles. Actually, the spiritual life turns out to be somewhat ordinary – on the surface. It involves the universal experiences of forming relationships, marrying and rearing children, struggling with problems, working. The doctrine of the two kingdoms teaches that God is hidden in ordinary, everyday life.

It is thus not simply moments of transcendent ecstasy that are 'spiritual'. Human relationships are spiritual. The pleasure of being so caught up with someone you love that you forget yourself – as happens so often in marriage – is a high and holy experience. When you act as a parent – protecting, disciplining, caring for, and loving your child – you are intimately close to God, who is hidden and active in what you do for your child. The satisfaction that we can feel from our work is something spiritual. When you are doing what you do best, when you get so caught up in your work or your art and it is going so well that you are, as they say, in the zone, the God who gave you your talents and your vocation is lurking close in the background.

We also encounter God not only when we serve and work, but when we receive His gifts through others. Being loved by a spouse or a parent or a friend is, in a real sense, being loved by God. Benefiting from the vocations of others – eating a meal in a restaurant, getting your car fixed, going to the doctor, slowing down at the sight of a police officer, buying something well-crafted – are all occasions for thanking God. For me, enjoying a work of art – whether listening to music, reading a novel, or gazing at a painting – is an especially pure example of God's sovereignty in human vocation. That I am able to take such unmerited pleasure through the God-given talents of other people, who have a vocation that I by no means have myself, always fills me with a sense of praise. Not just to the artist, but to the God who is so wildly generous in all of His gifts.

In the same way, let your light shine in front of others.
Then they will see the good things you do. And they
will praise your Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 5:16 (NIRV)