

TO SERVE GOD
Deuteronomy 6:4-14

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(online worship only)

If I asked you to tell me what God is like - if you had to write it down or tell someone in the next five minutes - what analogy would you use? Is God as safe and comfortable as your grandmother's lap? As solid and dependable as a giant redwood tree? Is God like the teacher who sees your potential and prompts you to do your best work? Would you say that God is as unpredictable as Lake Erie, or might you use this metaphor - that God's love wraps around you like the softest blanket? The Bible gives us dozens of images of God, and we each tend to gravitate towards the one we need the most, or the one we grew up with.

Today's sermon is the second in a series of three based on our church's mission statement - "Growing people to serve God and others." As I was outlining these three sermons, I knew that this one would be challenging. Last week, it was fun to talk about what it means to grow - to grow holistically and to grow spiritually — and our Ephesians passage reminded us that Christian growth is all about love. Next week we'll talk about serving others - well, that's one of the hallmarks of this congregation so many examples come to mind. But what about the middle portion of our mission statement? What does it mean to serve God? If you asked me just that question, I would say that we serve God by serving God's people. But that's next week's sermon. For today, our task is to stay with this middle phrase. Our church's mission is to grow people who serve God.

What does that mean and how do we do it? Well, we serve God through worship and study, which help us remember who God is and all that God is doing. We serve

God when we care for all that God has created. And we serve God by not being afraid to doubt, to dive deeply, to ask probing questions. God can handle our questions.

One of the best ones is simple to ask - “Just who is this God that we are called to serve?” Finding the answer to that question will provide a foundation for all that we do as we serve others.

The God we worship, the God fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, is described clearly in the Hebrew Scriptures, the same scriptures Jesus studied as a child and young adult. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read a summary of the instructions that were given to Moses and the people of Israel as they wandered for forty years in the desert. When you read through the book, (and I recommend it), you see the character and will of God — you see who this God is, what this God stands for, the kind of life that God imagines for God’s people. There are **three** primary characteristics of this God; I’m going to talk briefly about each of them.

First, the God who makes a covenant with the people of Israel is a forgiving God. In response, God’s **people** are to be a **forgiving people**. This is what it means to serve God - to recognize God’s nature as one that embodies forgiveness, and then to do our best to learn forgiveness ourselves.

I have preached many sermons about forgiveness; it has been the topic of book studies and retreats in this church. We’ve talked about forgiveness as a spiritual practice, how it helps you when you’ve been holding onto bitterness; we’ve talked about how to forgive ourselves.

But in the Hebrew scriptures, when God includes forgiveness on the short list of key instructions, it’s something beyond the personal. The law spells it out clearly: this forgiveness is economic. Every seven years, if anyone owes you anything, those debts are forgiven. Forgiveness means the forgiveness of debts. We pay tribute to this

aspect of forgiveness in the version of the Lord's Prayer we say in our church, "Forgive us our debts" - it's not only a figure of speech. It is the way God intended for the people of Israel to live — this society that was to function as a model for the rest of the world. Why? According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "because God does not want there to be a permanent underclass in hopeless debt."

Isn't it interesting how we have completely forgotten about this biblical law? It's an example of how all people pick and choose which passages of the Bible to pay attention to and which to ignore. We write this idea off as hopelessly out of date and unrealistic, but it's not a mere throwaway suggestion; it is described in detail. God knows that it is impossible for us to live with one another in a society that is peaceful and just when there are large chasms between those who are wealthy and those who are barely surviving.

The Bible calls us to think about forgiveness and neighborliness in radical societal terms. The God we worship is a God of extravagant forgiveness.

The second characteristic of the God described in the Hebrew scriptures is a God of hospitality, who calls us to be hospitable ourselves. This is the God who, according to Deuteronomy chapter 10, "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing." The command to provide hospitality is written very carefully. We aren't hospitable because we want to be charitable; we are hospitable because it is the **RIGHT** of all people to be given what they need in order to live with a sense of dignity. Again, God is describing a world of neighborly love.

I experienced this first-hand when I was in India. Our group visited a mission hospital in an eastern state where a woman who grew up in this church, a woman named Nancy Lott Henry, had served as a nurse for many decades. I wanted to see

what our church had helped to support during the years she was there, with her husband serving as the medical director. The man who took her husband's place, a man named Johnny Oommen, spent the day with us. He offered his hospitality to our group. We had lunch in his home and then he drove us around the region, showing us all of the community health projects that are sponsored by the mission hospital. This is in rural India, where it is very poor, almost subsistence living.

Johnny described for us his philosophy of working with the villages. Someone from the hospital, usually a nurse, goes to each village and asks for a meeting. The nurse describes all of the services that are available to the village, and then invites the villagers to think about what they would like, to ask questions, and to let the hospital know if they would like to work together to provide health services. Everything is done with a sense of intentional partnership. The hospital tries to avoid any messages that would convey to the villagers that "we know better than you", or "we know what you need". There's no authoritarian hierarchy, neither is there a sense of charity - as in, "we feel sorry for you and we're here to rescue you." We went to one small village after another and observed Johnny and the nurses treating every single person with gentleness and an enormous sense of respect. I only spent one day there but I learned from Johnny Oommen what Christian neighborliness is all about. It's not charity, it's not a hand out, it's not one person with means and power looking down on someone without means and power.

It's radical hospitality, realizing that what we have is a gift from God, and that each person is entitled to have what they need so that they can live in dignity.

Finally, the God we worship is a God of generosity, and we who would serve God are called to generosity ourselves. When we hear that word, we think of money, but it is more than that. God calls us to generosity of the heart, an opposite of stinginess in

every sense of the word. I'm not sure we ever really know what generosity is until and unless we recognize the times when we have been the recipient of something lavished upon us, something undeserved. The New Testament calls it grace, that gift of God that you cannot earn.

All that Jesus taught and lived was rooted in his understanding of the God of forgiveness, hospitality and generosity. Think of the sharing of the loaves and the fishes - the extravagance of that story - and how it conveyed to all who were listening that our God is a God of unbounded generosity. Think of the way the Good Samaritan went far, far beyond the bounds of what was expected to provide for the needs of the victim on the side of the road. Think of the woman who joyfully placed her last coin in the offering plate, and the father who welcomed home the prodigal son not with a lecture but with an undeserved lavish party. Jesus embodied and shared the values he learned at the feet of his rabbi teachers as he soaked up the stories of the God of the Hebrew scriptures - the God of forgiveness, hospitality and generosity.

It is this God whom we are called to serve. I spent some time this week reading through the book of Deuteronomy, where these values are described in detail, and I want you to know - as I finish this morning's sermon - that I am left with this rather sobering thought. The more you read about the kind of life God imagines for us, the more you realize how far we are from it. The world we live in **does not** value forgiveness, hospitality and generosity. These are profoundly countercultural values. We live in a world that values competition, winning, wealth, celebrity. We do not live as if we believe that everyone has a right to the basic necessities of life. There is a huge gap between the world as God envisions it and the world we inhabit.

If we are to be people who serve God, people who live according to the values of the gospel, we will need to be people who are willing to be different, people who think

differently and imagine differently. We will need to be people who save, spend and invest differently, who love and act differently. It's a lot to ask, especially now — especially when just getting through each day seems hard enough.

But I have glimpsed what it means to live differently - I saw it in India. I have **felt** it on my best days, in moments when I have stopped thinking in terms of who earns what and who deserves what and when I just gave generously, from the heart. I have felt it when I have been the recipient of amazing grace, when I have been forgiven and offered a new beginning. I hope and pray that you have glimpsed and felt it too. There are these moments in our lives when we get a taste of what God's kingdom, God's reign is all about, and in those moments we know that there is a reward sweeter than anything else this earth has to offer us. Living by love and grace is its own reward. There is nothing that compares to living close to the heart of God.

We are called to this mission: Growing People to Serve God and Others. May we have the courage to live up to our mission together. Amen.

I am indebted to an article by Walter Brueggemann, "Back to Basics," in Journal for Preachers, Advent 2017.