

## **SERVING OTHERS**

Philippians 2:1-4

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This is the mission statement of the Avon Lake United Church of Christ: Growing People to Serve God and Others. Two weeks ago, we talked about the first phrase, “Growing people.” We are called to grow and learn throughout our lifetimes, and Christian growth is all about love. Last week we read from the Hebrew scriptures that the God we are called to serve is a God of forgiveness, hospitality and generosity. Now we’ve reached the last phrase: “serving others.”

What does that word “serve” mean to you? In our world today, it often has a connotation of “otherness”, of distance and inequality. When you go to a restaurant, your server does not sit down with you...you are not on equal footing. One derivative of the word serve is the word “servant” - servants are never really part of the family, no matter how much warm feeling there may be between employer and employee. There are people who serve and then there are people who are being served, and there is distance between the two.

But in the New Testament, service is done in mutuality, not in a relationship of power. The gospels of Mark and Matthew give us a story of a time when two of the disciples - the brothers James and John - approach Jesus and ask, in essence, “Jesus, are we your favorites?” What they really say is, “When you go to heaven, Jesus, can one of us sit on your right and one of us on your left?” That’s how the story goes in Mark. In Matthew, it’s actually the mother of James and John who says to Jesus, “I want you to tell me that my boys are your favorite disciples, Jesus. Put one of them on

the right side of you and one of them on your left.” In both versions of the story, Jesus’ response is the same. He calls all of the disciples together and says, “You are thinking about greatness and stature according to the ways and values of this world. People claim to be great because they’re in positions of authority, and they lord over other people. But that’s not how things are in my world. In my realm, the person who is great is the one who serves. And I am among you as one who serves. I came not to be served but to serve, and to liberate all people from structures that keep some enslaved while others are free. I came to serve, to liberate all people from the power relationships in this world in which some people are the oppressed and other people are the oppressors. I came not to be served, but to serve.”

One of my favorite hymns is a newer one called “Won’t you let me be your servant?” The first verse says, “Won’t you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.” That verse describes a relationship of mutual service. Sometimes I am the one serving and sometimes I am the one being served.

Christian service is always service in a spirit of mutuality. We do not serve because we think we are better or know better than someone else, nor do we serve so that we might gain some power advantage over that person. The passage Beau read us from Philippians says, “Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.”

So we begin to see that just as it was necessary for us to define the character of God so that we can serve God, we need to define what service means. The WAY we

serve matters. Our motivation and intent make a difference. WHY we serve matters. Let me go back to the restaurant analogy. Sometimes you encounter a server in a restaurant who seems to genuinely love his or her job. This is a person who is professional and attentive, yet not too attentive, someone who seems to care about you having the best possible experience. Now maybe this person just knows how to fake it really well - that's what you might be thinking right now if you're a little cynical. But my brother worked in a popular Cleveland restaurant for many years, and I got to know the restaurant owner and other employees, and they truly cared for and about their customers. You know it when you feel it. On the other hand, it's painfully obvious when you encounter a waiter who does not really care about you or the job. The WAY we serve comes through and affects our relationship with the person we're serving.

Who is that? Who are we called to serve? We are called to grow people to serve God and others. What others?

Our source book, the Bible, gives us example after example of ever-expanding boundaries. We can start with the book of law in the Old Testament. Leviticus spells out for the Hebrew people what Jesus calls the most important commandment - "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Leviticus is one law after another, and it defines clearly who these neighbors are. You start with fellow members of the covenant community, those in your own tribe, and then the zone of neighborliness expands from there. Next Leviticus pays attention to the poor neighbor. Be sure that you are showing love to anyone you know who is poor, because they're vulnerable. Then Leviticus goes on to say, "Love the alien and immigrant as you love yourself." The alien among you is to be treated with as much care and respect as the neighbor. Who else? The widow

and the orphan - again, because they're often left vulnerable. And then Jesus breaks more boundaries, expanding the circle to include love for the enemy. Who are we called to love and serve? You've probably figured it out by now. The answer is everyone. There is no one we can exclude if we are people who ground our ethics in the biblical tradition, because there is no one outside the circle of God's love and care. If we are to truly serve others, we are to realize that there really are no "others". There is no us vs. them. There is only us.

I received a very challenging email this week from a member of our church. He said to me, in essence and in part, "Kelly, when you talk next week about 'serving others', I hope you don't just compliment and thank our congregation. I hope you also inspire us to consider the causes of injustice. After all, Jesus set a high bar for us." I appreciated that nudge, and I will say more about it, but first, I do want to thank the congregation for what you do already to serve others. We try our best to minister to one another within our own community - through formal programs like Stephen Ministry, Doorstep Dinners and Heavenly Helpers, through the pastoral fund and the coronavirus fund which assist members in financial need, and in many other ways. Through our Good Neighbor Thrift Shop, we provide affordable clothing and household items in a welcoming environment. We then extend the circle out in relationships with mission partners. Rather than trying to start our own projects to address issues like hunger and homelessness, we support those agencies that are already have expertise on the front lines. Our broadest reach is through our connection to the United Church of Christ. Working with thousands of other churches, we support ministries and missions on a national and global scale, including many efforts towards advocating for justice. Our

support of all of these mission partners is significant, and involves not just writing checks but the involvement of our members as volunteers and in decision-making capacities.

It all deserves recognition and thanks. But my email-writing friend is right. We cannot be satisfied with our efforts until we challenge the systems that oppress some of God's children while benefitting others. Jesus was in a constant battle with the Romans who occupied his homeland, because Roman taxation and other policies kept people like him and his neighbors in unrelenting constant poverty.

Our scripture passage calls for us to watch out for what is better for others, rather than always thinking about what's good for me, what's in it for me...

Every week we pray, "Thy kingdom come." Words that mean, "God, we want the world to change. We want the world to be the way you envisioned it when you first dreamed us up in your magnificent imagination." If we really mean, "Thy kingdom come," then we are saying, "God, we are willing for the world to change dramatically so that all of your people have what they need in order to live with a sense of joy and meaning and purpose. We are willing to do whatever it takes so that this amazing, diverse, gloriously beautiful planet is safeguarded for the next generations."

Serving others means looking carefully at our political and economic systems and asking hard questions about who is benefitting and who is being left behind, and what we can do to even the playing field.

I want to end by telling you that this is hard work. Serving others in a spirit of mutuality and humility, and allowing ourselves to be served is deep, personal work. It requires love and courage, it requires our hearts to be broken open. We can't do it

alone; we can only do it in a community in which we respect one another's differences, and forgive each other for our inevitable mis-steps. We can only serve others when we are grounded in the knowledge that God is love. That love will guide us and sustain us.