10-1/2-16 World Communion Sunday Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 20:20-28, James 1:22-25

“Participating in Our Ministries: Participating by Our Service”

On my trip to Houston in August, I experienced a glimpse of the global nature of the church that we celebrate on this World Communion Sunday. I was in Houston for an international clergywomen convention, yet because our plane did not leave until Thursday, my friend Kathleen and I had the opportunity to join the opening worship service of the World Methodist Conference, which brought together over 2,500 believers from over 108 countries and 88 Wesleyan faith communions.

It was truly a glimpse of heaven. Men and women from all over the world, united by our faith in Christ and our Wesleyan heritage. We began by singing “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” to a tune familiar to many except those of us from the US. Later I sang harmony together with a woman from Africa sitting in front of me. We recited the Lord’s Prayer in our own language

We were diverse, yet we were one in our praise to Jesus.

Today as we worship, as we offer our praise to Jesus, we gather as one local congregation that is part of a larger denomination and even more importantly part of the greater global church. That is what we celebrate on this World Communion Sunday. In spite of our differences, we are one in Christ.

And as we gather, so do my relatives in Anglican and Presbyterian and United Methodist congregations. As we gather, so do my classmates now serving in Japan and Zimbabwe and Oklahoma and Pennsylvania. We are scatted around the world, yet we are one this weekend, one in Christ.

Today we gather here, at Springboro First, from diverse backgrounds, from different struggles, yet one in Christ. Today we celebrate at the table of Holy Communion that God’s grace reaches out to each one of us, not because of what we have or where we come from, yet because we are all beloved children of God.

We come, united by faith.

We come, saved by grace.

We come, open to serve as a response to such grace.

What we do will not get us into heaven. Rather, we serve as an extension of living out our faith in this world. We serve as a response to God’s grace in our lives. We serve by living out our faith in practical ways, through our prayers and presence, our gifts, our service and our witness, in this particular congregation, yet connected with brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. That is what this sermon series is all about—calling us to concrete ways to live by faith through our participation in the ministries of the church.

Last week we considered the many gifts we have to share for the glory of God-

our finances and our skills, our spiritual gifts and our time,

our relationships and our knowledge, our passions and our possessions.

This week we are called to share those gifts in specific ways of service in the church and in the community.

First, though, let us look at what is meant by our service.

When you hear the word, service, what comes to mind?

Do you think of one who serves, like a waiter or flight attendant?

Do you think of a business, such as HVAC or auto repair?

Do you think of ways you are assisted or ways you have assisted others?

When you hear the phrase, service to Christ, what comes to mind?

Do you think of being present in worship or assisting in Sunday School?

Do you think of mission trips or Giving Tree gifts?

Do you think of giving time or money?

In reality, all of those are different ways to serve or be served.

Yet service in the name of Christ is so much more than placing a $20 in the offering plate or contributing a box of mac & cheese to the food pantry, although those are important contributions. Service in the name of Christ is so much more than sacrifices of time or energy.

Service in the name of Christ is everything we do and everything that we say that follows the way of Jesus. Service in the name of Christ is responding to God’s grace by faith lived out in practical, loving, helpful ways. It is how we treat strangers, family members and fellow followers of Christ. It is how we fulfill basic needs of body, mind and spirit. It is how we put others first ahead of our selfish desires.

I once saw posted on Facebook this quote: "Non-Christians read Christians, not the Bible."

So what do our lives say about who we follow, who we serve?

Do they show a life of self-service or a life of serving others?

.. Patricia and Tammy, registered nurses, discovered that about three newborn babies every week went home from their local hospital dressed only in at-shirt. It bothered Patricia and Tammy that those babies did not have a blanket and layette for their first trip home. Working through their church, they adopted that mission. Beginning the following Sunday, the nurses in the maternity ward were given a small stockpile of new layette sets. On the first Sunday of every month, the congregation was invited to bring layettes and place them in a basket that was prominently displayed in the lobby. Through Patricia and Tammy, for more than a decade   
the church has made sure that even the poorest mothers have had a new set of clothes and a blanket when it's time to take their new babies home.

-- Committed to Christ: Adult Readings and Study Book by Bob Crossman

.. Fran was in her mid-seventies and had more than her share of health problems. However, she was at church every Sunday, standing by the door before worship and shaking every hand, saying, "I'm so glad you are here today." Fran was at the door after worship, too. "Thank you for coming today," she would say. "I hope to see you next Sunday." On Mondays, she sent handwritten notes to worship guests the first seven times they visited. On Tuesdays she sent handwritten notes to any members who had missed three or more Sundays. On Wednesdays, as a volunteer at the local hospital, she would stop by to visit any patients related to the church.

-- Committed to Christ: Adult Readings and Study Book by Bob Crossman

Christian service is not about a checklist of accomplishments, but about a manner of living and loving in Jesus' name.

The letter of James is bluntly clear,

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (v.22)

Do what it says. Act on what you hear!

Consider this story from an ordinary women’s study group in the 1990s.

As one of the women told it,

"I'm a member of our church's Wednesday Women's Bible Study. We meet, have punch and cookies, and study the Bible. One day, one of the women said, 'It's so hard to understand Jesus sometimes. So confusing. You just don't know what he wants of us.' Another woman spoke up and said, 'That's not true. We already understand more of the Bible than we don't understand.   
Sometimes I think we sit here and talk about the Bible to avoid really living the Bible. The difficulty is not in the understanding; it's in the *doing.'*

Her words struck us. When we prayed at the end of our study, we prayed that God would show us what we ought to do. The very next week after our punch and cookies, one of the women told us how she had befriended a young man in her apartment building who is dying of AIDS.

His family has deserted him. He has no friends. She visits him, shares a couple of meals each week with him, runs errands. We knew what we had to do. Each of us has become an adopted grandmother for someone in our community with AIDS. We do cooking, errands, light cleaning. Sometimes we just talk. We can't do much, but we can do that. It really has changed our Bible study!"

--Upper Room Disciplines, 1997, p.255

The letter of James reminds us once again that true faith is more than words and more than weekend worship. True faith is evidenced in our actions, in our service, throughout the week, in practical and ethical and sacrificial ways. We are called to be generous, as examples of our generous God. We are called to hold our tongues, for anger does not reflect God’s righteousness. We are called to act on what we hear of God’s Word, even when that Word moves us out of our comfort zones.

And when we do not live out what we hear, when we profess Christ with our lips while neglecting to serve him by our actions, is it no wonder that the world looks at us in the church and considers us irrelevant, or worse, harmful?

Our struggle is that service goes against our human nature. We want to be served, not to serve. We want someone to feed us. We want someone to entertain us. We want someone to fill our needs. We want to make faith all about us rather than about Jesus.

We are not the first to struggle with what it means to serve in the name of Christ. Even the first disciples, who had spent three years traveling with, observing and learning from Jesus, even they did not understand the true nature of what it means to serve.

In our Gospel passage today, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus, kneels down in honor before him, then asks him a favor, “Jesus, declare that my sons will sit in the places of honor in your kingdom, one on your right and one on your left.”

Have you ever dreamed of being recognized for something you have done? How many of you as parents have wanted to see your child’s accomplishments acknowledged?

Yet her question would be like one of us going up to a presidential candidate and saying, “Pick my son as your Vice President.”

James and John, or in this Gospel their mother, wanted the places of honor reserved for them.

They wanted glory for being close to Jesus. They wanted a seat of privilege for being close to Jesus.

They didn’t get what Jesus came here on earth to do. None of the disciples yet understood the true nature of Christ’s kingdom here on earth. They didn’t understand yet that to follow Jesus meant to be one who served, not one who was served.

How many times do we strive to serve in the name of Jesus yet our motives are like this mother? We agree to serve at the food pantry to show our friends we have a heart. We agree to give toward missions because it soothes our conscience that we are helping the poor. We want to lend a helping hand more because it makes us feel better to do something than understand if our helping is doing more harm than good.

Jesus replied to James and John, “You have no idea what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” “Are you willing to suffer as I will suffer?” And they responded, “Yes, we are able.”

They may be willing to suffer for Jesus, yet in reality they had no idea yet what that suffering would entail. Just prior to their mother’s request, Jesus had predicted for the third time that he was heading to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise again.

But the disciples still did not understand what that meant. They still expected Jesus as Messiah to be a military leader who would overthrow the Roman government and give Israel its freedom. They still expected Jesus as Messiah to follow in the footsteps of King David, and be a great ruler over all of Israel. They still expected that when Jesus began to reign, they as his closest companions would get the places of prestige, the positions of power, and they would be honored and served by others.

When asked to drink the cup, Jesus was asking James and John if they would not only suffer for him, but also remain faithful to him until the very end in the midst of suffering.

Jesus asks us the same today. Are you willing to remain faithful to me until the end? Are you willing to serve when you are misunderstood or underappreciated? Are you willing to live for Jesus when the world around you ridicules men and women of faith? Are you willing to pay the price to claim the name of Christ?

If you find yourself in a dry spell of ministry, struggling to serve, wondering if all you do really matters, take heart from the words of 1 Corinthians 15:58 to encourage you: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

One of the hardest times to continue to serve faithfully is when those within the church community look down upon us, or misunderstand us, or become jealous of how we are sharing our gifts.

Like most families, the church family can be vicious sometimes to its own kin. How many of you sitting here today have ever been hurt by the words of another within the church? How many of you sitting here today have had to learn to let go and let God in order to focus on our common mission and ministry? How many of you sitting here today would admit to a twinge of jealousy of another believer’s gifts or leadership opportunity?

.. Preacher F. B. Meyer once admitted, “It was easy to pray for the success of G. Campbell Morgan when he was in America. But when he came back to England and took a church near to mine, it was something different. The old Adam in me was inclined to jealousy…”

--Steve Shepherd “Well Meaning But Wrong” 1-07 sermoncentral.com

The Gospel admits the disciples were human. When the other 10 heard of the request of James and John’s mother, they were angry. They were jealous. Maybe they wanted the seats of honor.

Maybe they wanted to be the first to ask for such glory.

Jealousy, selfishness and misunderstanding will tear the church apart if we allow it. For when we are hurt, we turn inward. When we turn inward, we look to our own wants and desires.

And when we look to our own wants, we neglect the mission of Jesus.

I have found that one of the best ways to get through our struggles as brothers and sisters in Christ is to serve together. Focus on together helping others. Focus on what unites us rather than what divides us. While we will still disagree, our witness to the world around us is not harmed in this way.

Before the disciples could begin to squabble amongst themselves, Jesus gathered them together for a teachable moment on the meaning of true service.

“You know that those who rule the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave—just as the Son of Man didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”

Sounds like the world and its definition of greatness has not changed much in over 2000 years.

In the time of Jesus, as well as in our world today, greatness was often seen as equal to success.

You were successful if you were in a position of authority. You were great if you had others to do what you wanted when you wanted. Greatness was about power and control, about authority and influence. Greatness, by that definition, was and is inherently selfish.

Jesus declares that is not God’s definition of greatness. For what happens with the world’s kind of greatness? It is never enough. There will always be more money to make, more people to conquer, more accomplishments to achieve. The world’s greatness also does not last. Someone else eventually takes over control. Someone else eventually becomes more successful. Someone else eventually inherits the money, the title, the respect.

Greatness as defined by God, however, is relational. It is about using our gifts, our skills, our resources for the common good. It is about serving others rather than others serving us. Greatness as defined by God is about being a servant to God’s will and ways, following the example of Jesus. We are blessed by the grace of God to be a blessing to others.

To be a servant of God is countercultural to our human nature. Society around us says go for the top, no matter how you get there. Jesus says go for the bottom, and lift up those around you.

Society says greatness is all about who rules. Jesus says greatness is all about who serves.

And true service is sacrificial. True service puts the needs of others ahead of our own desires.

Consider that the first disciples did eventually learn this notion of service. Every single one suffered and most died because they would not renounce their faith in Jesus. Around the world today there are men and women who suffer and die because they live according to their faith in Jesus.

Even here in this congregation there are leaders who would rather find themselves at a Bengals game or home relaxing rather than give their time and effort to the ministries of this congregation. Yet they serve out of their love for Jesus.

I learned much about service working at Wendy’s.

.. Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy’s, once appeared on the cover of their annual report dressed in a knee-length work apron holding a mop and a plastic bucket. Here’s how he described that picture: “I got my M.B.A. long before my G.E.D. At Wendy’s M.B.A. does not mean Master of Business Administration. It means Mop Bucket Attitude.”

Dave Thomas got his M.B.A. from being a servant of Jesus.

--Brian Bill “Becoming a Servant” 4-02 sermoncentral.com

How are you called to serve Jesus through the ministries of this congregation, reaching out to our community? How are you responding to the grace of God through sharing your rich resources of time and talent, of money and material? How are you putting into practice what you hear God calling you to do?

There are as many ways to serve as there are persons in this room today. Our bulletin insert lists a few specific ways to serve over the course of this next year. Maybe you are one who can cook or one who can teach. Maybe you are willing to come alongside one of our youth leaders as a second adult at youth events or maybe you are willing to visit those who cannot attend worship.

God calls us to serve in different ways over the course of our lives. Yet God also does not call us to retire from serving in the name of Jesus.

If God is stirring a new commitment to serve in your heart, ask yourself these questions:

What are your passions in life? What breaks your heart?

What needs do you see within 10 miles of your home?

We are all called to a life of service, a practical response to God’s amazing grace.

We are all called to respond in action to the Word we hear, read and proclaim.

We are all called to care for all of God’s children around us in this world.

.. John Wesley provides the best idea about being a true servant:

“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can,

in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.”

May it be so.

Let us pray.