9/1-2/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 28:16-20 Listening to God’s Call Making a Difference Series

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? Do you think of a worship service?

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

Do you think of assisting in Sunday School or helping with a funeral meal? Do you think of mission trips or Giving Tree gifts? Do you think of giving time or giving money? Do you think of reaching out to those in need?

My eldest son Nathan has to do community service hours for both NJHS and Boy Scouts. He has to find ways to serve a community organization for a certain amount of time. Yet I wonder, is that truly service when there is a payoff, when the service counts for rank advancement or requirements?

When he is used to serving in that way, how then do I teach him that service to Christ is not about what we get but is about what we give? How then do I teach him that service to Christ is a response to God’s grace?

This weekend we begin a new sermon series, “Making a Difference.” The title comes from a book by Rev. James Harnish who once asked the question “How can I make a difference?”

in response to a line in a poem by Mary Oliver “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

He asks:

..How can our lives, talents, energies and relationships become a part of the answer to our prayer that God’s kingdom will come and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven? How can we participate in God’s work of healing, justice, peace, and reconciliation in this world? How can the love of God that became flesh in Jesus become a flesh-and-blood reality through us?

-James Harnish, “Make a Difference” Abingdon Press pages 9-11 adapted

The good news is God wants our lives to make a difference! God calls us to make a difference.

God has created us to make a difference. God has empowered us to make a difference.

The Bible is full of stories of the ways ordinary people have made a difference through their obedience, their willingness and their faithfulness to God’s call upon their lives. From Abraham and Sarah to Esther and David to Peter and Andrew to Mary and Lydia to Paul and Timothy, God’s people have brought glimpses of God’s transforming power into the midst of our world through their faithful service.

This month, we will ponder how we are called to make a difference through the ways we serve, both within and outside the walls of the church. Today, we will begin by grounding our service in God’s call upon our lives, then later in the month we will reflect on specific ways in which we serve.

So what is God’s call on our lives?

For the original disciples of Jesus, God’s call began when Jesus looked at them and said,

Follow me.

Matthew 4 tells the story:

“As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (MT 4.18-22 CEB)

Immediately, these fishermen left their nets, left their families, left their ordinary lives to follow as a disciple of Jesus. Jesus didn’t give them a detailed syllabus of what they were to learn as disciples. They had no travel maps, no itinerary for the next 3 years, no real game plan. They only had faith in Jesus, and each day, each week, grew in understanding what it meant to be his disciple. Each day, each week, they learned from Jesus how to live like Jesus and what Jesus proclaimed as the ways of God’s kingdom.

The Gospels are honest that the disciples did not always understand Jesus. Sometimes they were awestruck by what they saw and heard. Sometimes they were confused. Sometimes they were amazed. And sometimes they doubted. Yet, still they followed.

God’s call upon our lives begins as well with the invitation “Follow me.”

Jesus says to us, “follow me, believe in me, be my disciple, love and serve others in my name.”

The journey begins with believing in Jesus, yet continues as a lifelong journey of following Jesus and growing more like Jesus. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, would call this journey the process of “Christian perfection.” This does not mean that we will ever be perfect in this world, yet each day we are open to the Spirit of God shaping our lives into the likeness of Christ. Each day we become more like Christ in what we do, think and say.

When we strive to follow Jesus, when we intentionally grow more like Jesus, we then are called to live out our faith in practical ways.

According to our membership vows in the United Methodist Church, we are to live out our faith through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. We are to pray with and for one another. We are to be intentional to gather as the body of Christ for worship and study, service and fellowship. We are to share our gifts and talents for the work of the church.

We are to serve within the church and on behalf of the church. We are to share our stories of what a difference Jesus has made in our lives.

God’s call in our lives begins with the call to follow Jesus, then gets lived out in practical ways,

including responding to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The Great Commandment is this, from Matthew 22:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

(Mt 22: 37-40 NRSV)

In what ways are we loving God? How do we show our love for God in our love for neighbor?

In what ways are we being daily missionaries, even in our own backyards, examples through our words and actions of the transforming grace of God in our lives?

Once we are called to follow Jesus, once we are called to love God and love neighbor, then we are also called to go, share and proclaim God’s good news.

The Great Commission is this, from Matthew 28:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Mt 28:19-20a NRSV)

“Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.” (MT 28:19-20a MSG)

Go - Make Disciples – Baptize - Teach

Go.

This word is actually better translated “as you go.” It is a participle, not an imperative. Jesus assumes we will continue moving when we follow him, we will continue reaching out to others, we will continue sharing what we have experienced. We are to go and keep going as followers of Jesus.

Go. Make disciples.

This is the only verb in this passage. We are to make disciples, to train others in the ways of Jesus. We do so through our relationships, through living as examples and mentors, through learning and loving and serving together. We can only make disciples if we are disciples ourselves. We can only serve as an example of what we ourselves have experienced.

Making disciples is not to be left only to the “professionals.” This is a call for all followers of Jesus. ..The research of unchurched people who join the church say that 75-80% of them were brought into the church by their friends and personal acquaintances. Only 9% were brought by pastors and only 2% by Sunday school teachers. It is always through the power of friends and friendship, through personal relationships with people they trust, that lifelong learners are really made.

 --Edward Markquart, sermonsfromseattle.com, adapted

Go. Make disciples. Baptize.

Jesus is not literally asking you to go out to a lake or pool and baptize your neighbor. Rather, Jesus is asking you to look at the meaning of baptism and live out that meaning as the church.

Baptism is a sign and symbol of God’s grace in our life, and that we commit to living in response to such grace that goes before us, grace that saves us, and grace that draws us deeper into discipleship. When a person is baptized, regardless of age, we witness to God’s presence and celebrate that faith is not possible without God’s grace.

Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach.

We are called to share with others the stories of and teachings of Jesus. Yet teaching is not only about content; it is also about practice. How do we live what we have learned? How do we commit to practice what Jesus instructed us? How do we understand the why behind what we do? We teach not only what we know but also how to live.

Our service to Christ and our service for Christ is grounded in God’s call upon our lives.

Jesus says to us today: Come and follow me then go and make disciples

Are we listening? Are we open to God’s call? Are we willing to move forward in faith?

Or do we doubt and hold back in fear?

I have always been intrigued by the reactions of the disciples prior to Jesus’ speaking his final instructions. These 11 disciples have seen Jesus crucified. They have heard from the women that they have seen Jesus risen from the dead. They have obeyed the call to meet Jesus on the mountain. Yet in this instance of meeting the risen Christ, some worshipped and some doubted.

*The Message* says it well:

“Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. [But some doubted.]

Some held back, not sure about *worship*, about risking themselves totally.” (MT 28:16-17 MSG)

We are not the first to struggle with what it means to serve in the name of Christ. We are not the first to be hesitant about risking ourselves in service to others for the sake of the Gospel.

Even the first disciples, those who had spent three years traveling with, observing and learning from Jesus, even they did not truly understand.

Our struggle may be 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.

Yet consider what Jesus said in Matthew 20. After James and John’s mother asked for seats of honor for her sons in glory, Jesus replied to all the disciples:

“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 Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.” (MT 20.25-28 CEB)

..In 1878, when William Booth's Salvation Army was beginning to make its mark, men and women from all over the world began to enlist. One man, who had once dreamed of becoming a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to enlist. Samuel Brengle left a fine pastorate to join Booth's Army. But at first General Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle, "You've been your own boss too long." And in order to instill humility in Brengle, he set him to work cleaning the boots of other trainees. Discouraged, Brengle said to himself, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?" And then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, unlettered fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "you washed their feet; I will black their shoes."

-K Hughes, Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome, Tyndale, 1988, p. 45.

Sermonillustrations.com: service

James Harnish admits that he was blessed. He said,

“I grew up in a home and church in which I was constantly encouraged to listen for and respond positively to Jesus’ invitation, ‘Follow me.’”

 -James Harnish, “Make a Difference” Abingdon Press page 17

Yet the way he lived in response to Jesus’ invitation changed as he grew as a disciple and said yes to God’s call upon his life. What began as a response in worship and summer youth camps grew into a call to pastoral ministry. He lived out that call in several different ways, from serving youth to serving farmers to serving those burned by the church.

Harnish also said that he had seen faithful laypersons “find new ways to serve after they faced changes in their lives and as they grew in their faith.

For example, he said…

I’ve seen married couples discover that their calling was radically different when they were young adult parents with dual careers raising small children, in contrast to the way they served when they became empty nesters and again when they retired.

I’ve made the journey with men and women who awakened to God’s call in the aftermath of a divorce, the loss of a career, a battle with cancer, or the death of a spouse.

I’ve encouraged people who returned from a mission trip with a new passion to confront the systemic injustice and racism in their community.

I’ve joined people who were motivated to engage in public protests when they were awakened to the ways governmental policies were impacting poor or marginalized people

Each person was awakened to new ways in which Jesus’ call to discipleship was being lived out through them and to the new ways they could make a difference in this world.

-James Harnish, “Make a Difference” Abingdon Press pages 18-19

May we not be like

..A girl returning home from Sunday school who expressed disappointment with the class’s reaction after the day’s lesson.She said, “We were taught to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, but we just sat!”

 --Source unknown. Homiletics 5-18-08

We are called to listen for God’s call, and to respond to God’s call.

We are called to go and share and serve and teach.

And remember as we continue down the lifelong journey of being disciples of Jesus, we do not go alone, nor do we go in our own power. Jesus goes with us. The Holy Spirit empowers us.

And we can be there for one another so that we go together as the body of Christ, the people of God in this world.

Jesus’ final words then are also words of assurance to us here and now:

“I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (MT 28:20 MSG)

We are all called to make a difference—through listening and responding to God’s call to us through Christ Jesus. In our work and our leisure, through our service and our witness, may we be open to the Holy Spirit guiding us to follow such a call.

May it be so. Let us pray.