

Sweating the Small Stuff: Help Out in the Neighborhood

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I Peter 4:8-10

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 1 Peter 4:8-10 (NRSV)

Let's join together in prayer. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear whatever word you have for each one of us and for us as a community and a congregation today. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then O Lord in response, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I was sitting out on my back porch earlier this week, and you know, this week, it got really hot, but the air was fairly dry earlier in the week. And in the evenings when the sun began to go down, I don't know if cool was the right answer, but the air was dry by Houston standards by any rate. And I was sitting there on our back patio, and we've spent over the last weeks a lot of time doing some work on our back yard. We fixed the fence, put in a new tree in. We got a new gliding rocking chair. We have a little patio loveseat, and I was sitting there with my two dogs, and it was a beautiful night. I thought to myself, this is an incredible moment. Just this very simple ordinary moment. Just sitting on my back porch. It occurred to me as I was sitting there how many of sort of ordinary moments I just miss. I'm not focused; I don't recognize that these moments are buzzing on by me every day, just these opportunities. Whether it's doing ordinary things. These can be filled with the presence of God.

Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book several years ago called *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, and that's the basic premise. That you don't come to meet God in the church - you meet God everywhere out in the world, and that's where you make your real offering.

She talks in the book how all over the place, there are these people who are searching for the presence of God—searching for something that is transcendent in their lives—searching for God.

Let me read to you what she says, "People seem to look all over the place for this treasure. They will spend hours launching prayers into the heavens. They will travel halfway around the

world to visit a monastery in India or take part in a mission trip to Belize. The last place most people look is right under their feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives. What possible spiritual significance could a trip to the grocery store have? How could something as common as a toothache be a door to a greater life?"

These everyday moments can be those moments when we set our minds right; we have the right mindset. When we stay focused on the moment, we can experience the presence of God in these small things—sweating the small stuff.

Today we're going to close our series. But we're talking today about those moments of service in the world around us. Those ways we can discover the presence of God in our moments of service. So whether that's working at the church, with one of the ministries, or working in your neighborhood school and serving on the PTA. Whether that's working on a neighborhood watch program, whether it's serving on a board, or taking a casserole dish to your next-door neighbor, or making phone calls to people that you care about. All of those are opportunities that we have to volunteer to choose to give of ourselves away in ordinary ways.

You know, there are two words in Greek for a servant. One is the word *doulos* which means like bondservant, sometimes translated as *slave*. The other word is the word *diaconos*. Now *doulos* is a word that's used most often to focus on our relationship with Christ, that we are bondservants to Christ. And that our focus is on being obedient and humble in our relationship with Christ. And to do what Christ did to serve as Christ served.

The word *diaconos* has to do with how we serve other people, how we are servants to other people. So what's so interesting is that those things are really joined together. That when we choose to have this sense of being bondservants to Christ, then we will reach out to others in the world to serve. In our passage today from 1 Peter 4, the word is *diaconos*, and it has to do with how we serve other people. But it is also about how we make an offering of ourselves to God.

I want us to look at this passage today and see what we can learn. And I want us to think about three things. The first is the heart of the servant, what we can learn about the heart of a servant. The second is the grace of a servant, and the third is the potential of the servant.

So let's jump right into this passage and see what we can learn. It begins with verse eight: "Above all maintain constant love for one another." So, the heart of a servant is love. Perhaps the most familiar passage in all of Scripture aside from Psalm 23 is 1 Corinthians 13. The third verse

says, "If I give all I possess to the poor, if I give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Mother Teresa is reputed to have said, "We can't all do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

It turns out when you go to the website *motherteresa.org* that's carrying on her ministry it makes it clear that she didn't actually say that. But the sentiment is still real and powerful. That the driver of the heart of what we do is love, that's what it means to really be a servant. To be a *doulos*. To be part of the diaconate that serves.

We serve for a real variety of reasons. Sometimes we say "Yes" to serve and to volunteer just out of pressure. My wife, when we was at a former church, was in charge of the children's Sunday school programs. She would call people and ask if they'd teach Sunday school. And she'd call them on the phone, and they'd say, "Well, let me pray about that!"

You have to know my wife. She's rather bold. Well, if someone said that she'd say, "Okay, I'll hold on while you pray." It made it harder for them to say no. What she really wanted to say was, "I've already prayed about it, and you need to say yes."

Sometimes we just get this pressure that pushes on us, and we feel this sense that we have to say yes. Sometimes we do it out of obligation. The school calls, and they say, "Hey, everyone is going to bring snacks. What are you going to bring? You've got to do your part! You've got to carry your share of the load."

Sometimes we serve just out of boredom. I have to say that when our kids were small, and we'd go to those swim meets, and they'd go on and on for maybe six hours. In the heat, I'd choose to be a timer for the swimming because it gave me something to do other than just sit there during all that time. Just to step in and have something to do.

Now here's the deal. It isn't that the reason we say yes to something has to be because of our incredible love for people. But what is the case is that as we choose to serve, the heart of that, the spirit of that is got to be filled with love, of caring for other people.

We've had all these conversations about how we're going to gather back together how the economy is going to start. And the motivation behind all that we do as Christians has got to be love. We choose not to gather together in large groups, not because we're afraid of getting the virus ourselves, but because of our love for others, and we don't want to pass it to them. We wear masks, not because we're afraid of getting the virus - that's not the point. It's because we don't

want to share it with others. It's out of our love for them. We social distance even when it's annoying, even when it's hard, not because we're afraid of getting the virus, but because of our love for others, we don't want to pass it to them.

It goes the other way, too. We choose to do what we can to help the economy reopen, to be courageous to step out in faith because there are 36 million people out of work, and they need to feed their families. And we want to be part of a movement that begins to do that. And it's out of love for them that we make those choices. It's about what is the driver behind, the motivation, the spirit behind what we do.

I've been thinking a lot during this pandemic about the caregivers in assisted living. That's probably because my mom was in assisted living for a couple of years, and I watched the caregivers care for her. Boy, what a tough job to care for people who sometimes are in a difficult place in their own lives. And what I realize is that there is sort of two categories of caregivers. They all are getting paid and are working because it's a job. But some of them seem to be doing only because it's a job. And others - the ones I'm just so grateful for - were those who everything they did, everything they do, you can tell, is filled with a spirit of love. A spirit of really deep, honest authentic compassion.

The heart of what we do as servants is that we're full of love.

The first part of the deal is, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another." Then it goes on in verse 8b: "...for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining." This is the grace of a servant.

Look, we have to recognize, we have to give ourselves a break. We can't beat ourselves up because we're not serving enough because we're not doing enough, because we're not saving the world. Because we're enjoying going to play golf. We don't function that way. And the same way about other people. We want to give others what Colossians says, forbearance. To cut others some slack, to offer other people grace. That that is what it means to be a real servant is that we give ourselves grace, and we give others grace as well for "love covers a multitude of sins."

David Steele tells the story about looking through a Christian magazine. He comes across an advertisement that I thought was excellent. It's an ad for a director of Christian education. It says, "Imperfect church, imperfect pastor seeks imperfect director of Christian education in order that grace may abound."

He's a pastor in Nebraska, and he says, "I think that's a great advertisement for a DCE - that we're imperfect people all of us are imperfect people." I would tell you that St. Luke's that imperfect church filled with imperfect congregants is seeking visitors. Imperfect visitors and guests so that grace may abound.

When we are real servants, there is this sense in which we offer one another grace. I don't know if you've ever seen the grave marker for Ruth Bell Graham in the cemetery where she's buried. It has her name and dates on it, but it says, "Construction complete. Thank you for your patience."

I love that picture! We have to have this patience for each other. We're all works in progress. Part of it is to have a sense of humility as we deal with other people. As we serve, we serve not proud, and we serve in a way that recognizes our humble place.

A couple of weeks ago, an article came out from the Gospel Coalition. It was written by a man named Ern McCracken, and it's about how the church is responding to Covid19 and how within us, we have people with a wide variety of different opinions. It got me thinking. As I talk to people right now, there seems to be this sort of growing kind of anger and annoyance that mirrors the world around us in so many ways. He writes this: "Have you noticed how remarkably confident, so many of us are in our views right now? Unfounded certainty on the part of laypeople, leaders, modelers, and experts alike is just as contagious as Covid-19 itself. We can all use a bit more humility. And the church should lead the way."

One of the ways that we can move beyond that sort of sense of self-righteousness is to focus ourselves on service. When we turn our hearts from ourselves, our views, our understandings, what we think is right, and begin to focus on others and how we can serve them in every way. Then we find in ourselves that sense of self-righteousness begins to be mitigated.

I heard on the radio this week an interview with a man named Dan Harris. He's a newscaster, and he's written a book called *10% Happier*, and it's kind of about meditation and how you deal with your anxiety. It was interesting in the interview he said, "I think meditation helps a whole lot, but there's something far simpler that will help us deal with our anxieties and our sense of fear. It's service. It's doing something for somebody else." Then he said that what that does is it gets us in touch with what God has put inside us. With the way God made us because God created us to be servants. When we approach others, when we serve, that raises

within us that servant heart within us. And it allows us to offer grace to others and grace to ourselves.

"Be hospitable to others without complaining." Because "love covers a multitude of sins."
The grace of a servant.

Now here's the third thing. Look at verse 10: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." This is a very basic Christian principle, this notion that each one of us has been given spiritual gifts. And that when we live in those spiritual gifts, when we serve out of those spiritual gifts, then we experience the presence of God more. This is about the potential of a servant. To focus on what we can do rather than on what we can't do.

Penny Allen is one of our members, and she is a seamstress, and she does embroidery, and so she made this awesome mask with the church logo on it. It's just awesome. She made two of them, and she wrote me the nicest note to let me know she'd left it for me. And I could sense that as she did what she's good at, as she lived out of her gifts, what she discovered is this great joy that comes with serving out of the place where you've been made to serve.

Now let me just offer a warning about this. Sometimes we're looking to be given this gift, and it's like this one gift, when we think, "That's what I'm made for and now I know what it is and now it's presented to me in sort of a perfect way. Leonard Sweet talks about how when he used to go off on business trips, he'd always bring his children back gifts - a stuffed animal or something he'd purchased at the airport. It got to be that whenever he returned from a business trip, they would say, "Oh, dad welcome home! What gift do you have for me?"

And he goes on to say that sometimes we in sort of our childlike way say that to God, "God, what gift do you have for me? Come on; I need it wrapped up in a little package, so it's clear to me what it is that I'm supposed to do."

The truth is that we can try and discover what those gifts are. There is an inventory you can take online (stlukesmethodist.org/spiritualgiftsdiscovery). It's a tool that helps you discover what your gifts are. But the truth is that they don't come to us already developed and ready to go. They come to us with like a seed, and as we step in to try them, we discover whether we can develop them and grow them and use them. Our gifts have to be worked.

So we keep waiting. What happens is that we sit around all of our lives waiting for that one perfect gift to come our way. When the truth is that there are dozens and dozens of opportunities of service that just blow on by us.

The way we discover those gifts is when we see those opportunities for service we try them, we step into them. We do say yes. And as we do that we experience the presence of God. As we choose to serve we experience the presence of God.

During this time one of the most frustrating things for us in the church has been the challenge that's presented to our musicians, our choir. So we have maybe a 100 choir singers, and they've been doing what they can to get together on Zoom and hang out together and build community, to support one another and to share their concerns and their joys, and to talk about the future. But it's frustrating because what singers want to do is they want to sing. It's one thing to get 2 or 4 or 8 people together on you know the little boxes where we broadcast the music, and we've been able to do that with some of our musicians. But to get 100 choir members together to do that all at one time, that's going to be a challenge. But we're going to do it because it's really simple. Singers want to sing. That's their giftedness. That's where they feel God's pleasure, and they experience the presence of God.

What we do is look for those opportunities that we can step out in service and learn whether, in fact, that maybe is the place of our giftedness.

Now, friends, let me just finish what the Scripture says. We read earlier through verse 10, but let me read to you verse 11: "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and power forever and ever. Amen."

Look, my point here today isn't to say, "You all should go serve more!" My point today is that when we choose to serve, we can set our minds in a way that makes it our offering to God. It might be a small thing or a big thing. But it is our offering to God.

When I was in seminary, I worked at a church in Duncanville, and every Sunday before the service, the pastors would meet in the sacristy, the robing room, and there was an usher there who would come and help us put on our robes. He'd been doing it for many years. One day, after he'd helped us, I said to him, "You know we're not like royalty who needs somebody to come and put our robes on us like that. We can actually put our own robes on." He got very upset, and

the senior pastor got very upset at me. He said, "You know, this is what I do. And this is the gift I have to offer. And if it's not something you want, I'm sorry." And he was really hurt. And my senior pastor was upset. He said. "You know, we need to be gracious and receive these gifts that people are offering. It's what they want to do."

I learned a lot that day. That it is not that you do these huge great things, it's that your mindset is that you want to do whatever you can and to make it your offering to God.

This is Memorial Day weekend when we remember those who have made that ultimate gift. The ultimate sacrifice. They're given their whole lives. They've given it in a sense in just one moment. It's funny when we talk about the military as "the service." They're servants. And if you talk to anyone who's been in the military, they'll tell you that much of what they do is not glorious. It is drudgery, and it's nitty-gritty. It is the daily-ness of life. And their offering isn't just that one gift of life that they gave at the end of their life, but what they do each and every moment of each and every day. That's being in the service.

All of us should be able to say that we're in the service. And that every little thing we do, every way we serve one another, is our offering to God.

Hear once again the words of 1 Peter. "Above all, maintain constant love for one another. For love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you for the privilege of servanthood. Of giving ourselves away, in generosity and service. We pray that as we choose to do that each and every day in the altar in the world, in each and every moment, that that will be our offering in worship to you. And that we will sense your presence and your pleasure. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.*