

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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September 13, 2009
Discipleship Series
Matthew 25:31-46

A Fourth Mark of Discipleship: Serve

In these early weeks of the fall we've been focusing on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus by lifting up 6 marks of discipleship. As we do this, we're being very specific in how you can organize your life in such a way that there is a discipline to being a disciple. Both words, discipline and disciple, come from the same root meaning to teach or to learn. So as disciples we're both learning more about what it means to follow Jesus, while at the same time teaching others by the way in which we live our lives. The first 3 marks of discipleship that we have addressed are, 1. Pray daily, 2 worship weekly; and 3. regular Bible reading. Today I want to speak about the 4th mark of discipleship which is serving in the church and beyond it.

Even if one has only a cursory and rudimentary awareness of the life of Jesus, there is no getting around it that Jesus was regularly engaged in the lives of the people he met along the way during his 3-year ministry. Whether he was teaching them spiritual truths, or providing miraculous healings of those who were broken in body or spirit; whether he was providing food for the hungry or demonstrating God's love through miraculous intervention, Jesus' life was lived in service to both those among his followers as well as to those beyond his followers. Jesus made it clear over and over again that it's God's intention that we live together, providing mutual support and accountability. Jesus demonstrated and taught that we have a responsibility to one another as fellow members of the human family. While our own culture and society are based on individual rights and freedoms, the Christian church has always provided a complementary counterbalance by emphasizing the qualities of life together and how we as members of the community have a stake in ensuring the common good. And we who have engaged in lives of service inside and beyond the church have found the truth in what Albert Schweitzer said. "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." (*Worth Repeating*, Bob Kelly, ed., Kregel Publications, 2003. p. 312)

The Christian church certainly does not have a monopoly on service in the world. Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and other youth organizations have always placed a high priority on instilling a spirit of service at a young age. Service organizations like the Lions Club, Kiwanis International, and Rotary International, to name just three of many, provide abundant opportunities for service in the community and around the world. Governmental agencies like the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and Vista, as well as non-governmental organizations like the American Red Cross and International Red Cross meet many human needs, again providing opportunities to serve.

While service organizations provide abundant ways for us to offer service in the world, our Christian faith provides a larger framework for understanding it. The story Jesus told known as the "Judgment of the Nations" is one of the places we can gain such insight. Unlike the parables Jesus told, that take real-world, ordinary situations with which we can relate in order to make a point or teach a truth, this passage from Matthew's gospel is a story, pure and simple. It is set far in the future, at the end of time, and is told in an almost dreamy sort of way. It speaks of the ultimate destinies of those whom are

being evaluated by the Son of Man at the end of time. Some of them are told that they are being welcomed into the kingdom because of the way they treated Jesus during their lives—feeding him when he was hungry, giving him water when he was thirsty, welcoming him when he was a stranger, clothing him when he was naked, caring for him when he was sick, and visiting him when he was in prison. When they hear this, they're quite puzzled because they have no memory of ever meeting Jesus in any of these conditions of need. And it's then that they're told that when they were serving any of the least of those who are part of the human family, they were doing it to Jesus. It's striking of course to learn from this story that Jesus so identifies himself with the least of these among us, that he himself is being served when they are served. What's startling about this though, is to realize that those who are chosen for the kingdom, those who served the least of these, had no idea that they were serving Jesus. They were not motivated by any sense of reward for the service they rendered. They were not working to ensure their eternal destinies. They were not carrying out their part of any bargain where a reward awaited them for good service. None of this. Their motivation for service arose out of their identity as followers of Christ. It's what we do. It's not an obligation. It's not a requirement. It's not a job. Service for Christians is part of who we are.

Discipleship then, of course, includes living out lives of service both within the church itself as well as in the larger community and the world. What's even more wonderful about this life of service is that God has given us everything we need to live out this service. This is not news to those of you who have been around this church for more than a little while. A little over 8 years ago now, a spiritual gifts ministry was launched in our congregation in which folks in the church are able, with the help of a class and mentors, to discover or rediscover the gift or gifts that have been given to them by the Holy Spirit. These gifts include proclamation, servanthood, teaching the faith, encouragement, generosity, nurturing leadership, mercy, wisdom, knowing, faith, healings, miracles, discernment, tongues, interpretation of tongues, apostleship, helping, visionary and managing leadership, evangelism, and shepherding. Everyone has at least one of these gifts and maybe even two or three of them. All of these spiritual gifts together provide everything that is needed to serve in the church and beyond it to meet the needs that are there. If you haven't yet been through our spiritual gifts course, please talk to one of the pastors or contact Jane Hodges, our spiritual gifts coordinator. There's a whole section in the church website about this. The back of the bulletin has the web address.

Over the last 8 years, hundreds and hundreds of opportunities for service have been filled through the matching of spiritual gifts with ministry to be done. Folks in the church who are serving will tell you that they're excited and pleased to serve, because they're able to use their God-given gifts to carry out their ministry and service.

As was mentioned earlier, today is Love Awareness Day when we're highlighting the work of Love INC, Love In the Name of Christ. This ecumenical ministry has become one of the truly bright spots in Gallatin County because of the amazing ministry of service that it is providing—matching the real needs of people with those in our churches who have the means and spiritual gifts to meet those needs. Nancy VanDyken will be giving us some details on the work that is going on in Love INC.

It's no coincidence that this Sunday was designated as Love Awareness Day. Knowing that our worship would be focused around this fourth mark of discipleship—service—it was the perfect day to tie in the opportunities we have to serve through this agency.

Finally, as we continue to live into the themes that arose out of our Journey of Renewal year, the theme, “Serving People” is further evidence that we in First Presbyterian Church understand the centrality of this aspect of our ministry.

① Pray daily; ② Worship weekly; ③ Regular Bible reading; ④ Serve in our church and beyond it. These first four marks of discipleship lead into the remaining two: ⑤ Spiritual relationships; and ⑥ Giving of my time, talents and resources.

At first it may seem like a lot of work to be a disciple. What I hope we'll discover is that these marks of discipleship are not work that wearies, but rather disciplines that lead to spiritual growth and maturity.