

On a Mission from God Sermon Series
Serves God Through Serving Others
March 29, 2020
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We started this sermon series on our Mission Statement on March 1, when there was still in-person worship and an NCAA tournament and “social distancing” was something enforced by chaperones at middle school dances. How things have changed in five weeks, huh? And yet, the mission of the church has not only stayed the same but become more relevant. More than ever, we are called to the church, the light shining in the darkness and isolation of this world, connecting people to God and each other.

Here’s proof. Both of our first two live-streaming worship services had about 130 live views while we were streaming them. If you figure an average of two people per household, that’s around 260 people worshipping together. And the streams have received over 2500 views since they were originally posted. People may not be in church, but they are looking for church, an embodiment of God’s hope in this world infected by fear. It is imperative that we keep being the church.

Today, we look at the last line of our mission statement. There is a natural progression to the points of the mission statement. We bring people in by welcoming and accepting them; we grow them up by inviting their questions and encouraging them; we care for them through that process; and then we send them out to put into action what they have seen and learned here. Sending them out is the focus of our sermon today as we talk about the last part of the mission statement, that we connect people to God and each other by serving God through serving others.

There were several different theologians I considered referencing for this sermon to help undergird the main points. I considered Paul Tillich, since I studied him in seminary, but then I realized I didn’t remember anything I studied about him. I considered Freidrich Schleiermacher, but I think it’s wise to never quote someone whose name you can’t spell. So instead, I settled on one of my old reliables, that famous theologian Sylvester McMonkey McBean.

Surely you’ve read some of his work, haven’t you? McBean is the main character in the Dr. Seuss Book The Sneetches. McBean shows up with his Star-On Machine, which will turn plain-bellied Sneetches into star-bellied Sneetches, thus upping their status in the Sneetch community. The way it worked was you walked into the machine, got your star, and then walked out a new Sneetch – all for a price, of course. That, in the theological world, is what’s known as the McBean Cycle of Transformation.

That’s what the church is called to do. We bring them in, we help them transform, we send them out. When the Sneetches left the Star-On Machine, they did so with stars on their bellies and noses in the air. But we are called to leave this church very differently, with our eyes open and our hands ready to work. In other words, we are called to go from this place different than when we came it, to go out with a purpose, to take what we’ve learned and experienced and share it. This is not a side-effect of being in church; it is the primary purpose for it. As Jesus says, we are called not to be served, but to serve, to give our lives for others.

This last part of our mission statement is incredibly important to our future as a church, because it is the one that calls us beyond ourselves out into the world. We can do the other four things and never leave the building. But the church doesn’t exist for the church’s sake. It exists for the sake of the world and is called to take what we learn and experience in the sanctuary out into the schools, shops, and neighborhoods around us. Every gift we’re given – including the gift

of our money – is not meant for us to hold onto but for us to share for the greater good of God’s kingdom. If we keep our gifts to ourselves, hiding them away so that no one else will get them, hoarding them like toilet paper to make sure we have enough, we’re perverting the reason we were given the gifts in the first place.

Our service is one of the ways we use our gifts, and it’s one thing Crestwood does incredibly well. If there were any part of the mission statement we could go ahead and check off our list, it would be this one. “Serves God through serving others.” Let’s see: Serving the homeless? Check. Working with young, single mothers? Check. Reading to classes at Glendover Elementary School? Check. Thousands of dollars given away each month, both locally and globally? Check. Building Habitat Houses, going on Mission Trips, opening our building free-of-charge to non-profit groups? Check, check, and check!

But before we get too puffed up, let’s check ourselves. It might help us to go deeper by asking the question “Why do we serve?” It’s easy for churches to get caught up serving others for reasons other than serving God. For example, have you ever heard the term “altruistic egoism?” Altruistic egoism is the belief that by helping others, we can make ourselves feel better. And there is an element of truth to that. I do feel better about myself when I help someone else. But if that’s my main motivation, I’m engaging in self-service. If I’m serving someone else in order to check something off my mental feel-good list or to pad my spiritual resume or to wedge my foot in the front door of Heaven, I’m actually doing a disservice.

Let me explain that with an analogy. While we lived in Chicago, I came to have a deep, soul-level hatred of traffic. And I had plenty of opportunities to cultivate that hatred. That’s why I loved the concept of open-road toll plazas. When you came to a toll booth, if you had a nifty little device attached to your windshield, you could zoom right on through without stopping to pay the toll, allowing the government to take your money without you even realizing it. But if for some reason you didn’t have that nifty little device, when you came to a toll plaza you had to take this little exit and sit in the line waiting to go through the toll booth, while all the people with the nifty little devices were zooming by and pointing their fingers at you and laughing.

I wonder if sometimes we don’t look at serving others as detours in our lives. We’d much rather keep zooming ahead on our own path, but because we know it’s the “Christian” thing to do, we take that little exit from our full-speed schedules and help someone else out, all the while thinking consciously or subconsciously, “I can’t wait until I can get back to doing what I want to do.” When we do that, the person we are serving is no longer a person in our eyes; they are simply a means to an end, a by-product in our desire to “do the right thing.” Altruistic egoism.

So maybe we serve others because of altruistic egoism, because it makes us feel better. Or maybe we serve because it reflects well on us to do so. That doesn’t mean we serve to get fame or publicity but it is human nature to want to be appreciated for our efforts. After all, how can our lives make a difference if no one sees us making a difference? Jesus warned about people who use faith to make a spectacle of themselves. There are so many things God calls us to do of which we will never see the benefits, things that feel so small or insignificant. That meal at the soup kitchen may not change a person’s life; that dollar in the beggar’s cup isn’t going to rescue her from poverty. Why make the effort if we’re not going to see a return on our investment? Let’s face it: serving others has very little upside for us.

So if we don’t get results and we don’t get recognition and we don’t get to pad our spiritual resume, why should we serve? What does our mission statement say? “Serve God through serving others.” We serve others, our mission statement says, as a way to be obedient to the call to serve God. Through Jesus Christ, God poured out love on us in the most extravagant,

lavish way. It's like trying to pour the ocean into a coffee mug. When you have that much love given to you, you can't help but let it overflow in your life, and one of the ways we do that is to turn that love into action through our service to others.

Thankfully, we're not called to do it perfectly. Once, at a Habitat workday, I was put in charge of placing stakes in the ground so we could rope off some newly cemented driveways. Rather than asking me to paint or measure and cut wood, those in charge were able to pick up on my incredible stake-placing gifts. So I set about my task with much diligence, placing the stakes at just the right depth and distance from each other. I mean, it was a work of art! Of course, what didn't realize was that the crew had already poured the concrete for the driveway next door, so as I was placing stakes for one driveway, I was leaving footprints in the wet cement of the neighboring one. I was not invited back to place more stakes the next year.

God does not call us to serve perfectly; God only calls us to serve. If God only used perfect people, nothing would ever get done at this church. We're all imperfect. But guess what? God still loves us and still wants to use us. A Bengali poet once wrote, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." When we give, when we care, when we serve, we do so with the joy of knowing God loves us and God is using us – us! – to make a difference for someone.

For me, the ultimate reason we are called to serve is that we live in a world that needs serving, a world that needs to see tangible reminders that God hasn't given up on us yet. The need around us is so overwhelming that it can paralyze us from doing anything. But every small act of service we do makes a difference far beyond our effort. We may not see the difference, but we trust God is working through us. Our former General Minister and President, Sharon Watkins, was at a World Council of Churches convention in Brazil. She was talking with Pastor Clement Mputu, Vice President of the Disciples of Christ in the Congo. She said he looked straight into her eyes and told her about the six million people who have died in the Congo war. Six million. "Doesn't anybody even care?" And then he stopped and waited for an answer.

When we emerge from this crisis, the world is going to look a lot different for many people. But their questions will still be the same. They will want to know if God is real. There are people out there who have given up hope that God cares about them. As Gandhi said, there are people who are so poor they only see God in a piece of bread. Do we have any bread to give? Do we have any hope to give? Our mission statement says we serve God through serving others. The world is waiting to see if those are just words on a page or if we really mean it. They are waiting for answer.