

Sermon, October 2, 2022 Serving, Acts 9:36-42

When you hear the words “serving” or “service” what words or stories from scripture come to your mind? My next question is “How have these words or stories affected the way you think and/or live your life?”

While there are many stories of Jesus serving others in the gospels the one story that stands out for me, is the story of Jesus taking on the role of servant and washing his disciples’ feet. Can you imagine what that experience would have been like for the disciples? I doubt that it was just Peter who resisted having Jesus wash his feet. For their teacher to kneel down and wash their feet would have been unheard of. The chorus of this song reflects this discomfort:

Jesus took a towel and he girded himself,
Then he washed my feet, yes, he washed my feet.
Jesus took a basin and he knelt himself down,
And he washed, yes, he washed my feet.

After washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus told them that he had set an example and that they should wash one another’s feet. I think this verse of the song, Will You Let Me Be Your Servant, highlights the challenges in washing one another’s feet.

Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I will have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.

While I have felt called by God to use my gifts in service to others, I, like Peter, have resisted the need of accepting the service of others. I am much more comfortable serving or helping someone else than being served or needing to accept help. Obviously, I have bought into our world’s view of being independent rather than Jesus’s call to be interdependent. It seems the older I get, and probably the more help I need, the more often I find myself wanting to say something like my 3-year-old granddaughter, ‘I want to be able to do it myself!’

A week ago, God challenged me again on this way of thinking, through the daily devotional reading from the Henri Nouwen Society. The title was “Our Weakness Blesses Others.” I quote: “Our weakness and old age call people to surround us and support us. By not resisting weakness and by gratefully receiving another’s care we call forth community and provide our caregivers an opportunity to give their own gifts of compassion, care, love, and service.” End of quote.

I sense the call to repentance or to change my whole way of thinking - from seeing my need to ask for help or accommodation as negative - to seeing that responding to my needs is a possible blessing to others.

Back to the story. Jesus followed his instruction to wash one another's feet with giving the disciples a new commandment to love one another. Why? So that everyone would know that they were his disciples. (John 13:34)

During our Love Languages of God series a number of years ago, we learned that "acts of service" is one of the five love languages of God. This song helps me remember this new commandment and the five love languages of God.

A new commandment I give to you	Pay attention to the things I said
Love one another as I have loved you	Pay attention to the things I did
By this everyone will know	Pay attention to the ways that I loved you
You are my disciples if my love you show.	Pay attention and follow me true.

Words are important to encourage and affirm
Healthy touch can love confirm.
Giving gifts, acts of service do
And spending time can express love too.

So what was the early church's response to Jesus' words and actions? I think today's story from the book of Acts is proof that the church in Joppa took seriously Jesus's words and his actions in serving others.

Before we look at this story more closely, I think it is helpful to note that the book of Acts is like part 2 of the gospel of Luke, written by the same author. While the book of Luke is about what Jesus said and did, the book of Acts or Acts of the apostles, as it is called in my bible, tells us how the early church grew. Something else to remember is that the gospel writers had particular people groups in mind when they wrote. Luke and Acts were written with the Greeks or Gentiles in mind.

Let's look now at the different characters in this story beginning with Tabitha or Dorcas as she is called in Greek. I was intrigued to learn that she is the only woman identified as a disciple in the New Testament. Reta Halteman Finger, a bible prof, notes that Luke uses the word disciple with a feminine ending, which may imply that Tabitha was one of the original women disciples who accompanied Jesus and is now part of the apostolic mission.

I think that by giving us her name in two languages Luke clues us into the fact that the Christians in Joppa included both Jews and Gentiles. The fact that her house had an upper room, might indicate Tabitha was wealthy, possibly hosted their meetings in her home and had the gift of hospitality.

But the most important thing we learn about her according to Luke is her devotion to good works and acts of charity. Or we could say she devoted her energy and her resources in serving the needs of others. The example Luke gives us is of her sewing clothing for and/or with needy widows. The widows' response to her death indicates to me that she had touched many lives and made many friends. Her example encourages me to look at how I use my gifts, energy and resources to help the needy.

Now let's look at Peter's role. Did you notice his quick response to the call for help? I also noticed his actions once he got to Joppa. He emptied the room, he prayed, he turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up,' he reached out and helped her up and then he called the saints and widows and showed them that she was alive.

Do these actions sound familiar? If you think so, it might be because they are exactly what Jesus did when bringing Jairus's daughter back to life. Peter was following the example of Jesus in responding to the needs of others and allowing God to work through him. A definite example for each of us today.

Let's move on to the role of the widows and disciples or saints as they were sometimes called in the bible. Who were these widows? Since Joppa, was a port along the Mediterranean Sea it is probably safe to guess that many of the widows' husbands had been fishermen who were shipwrecked and drowned in bad weather. Their wives and children would have lost not only their husbands and fathers but their source of survival. They probably were the poorest of the poor. It appears that there was a group of them in the church. When Tabitha died, they were devastated and wanted to show and tell others what she had done for and/or with them.

Some of the saints and widows immediately washed Tabitha's body and laid her in an upstairs room while others discerned what to do next. They decided to call for Peter's help and sent two of their group to fetch Peter. I wonder why they didn't follow the usual practice of the day of putting spices on her body in preparation for burial? Might it have been because they were expecting a miracle?

At first, I wondered why they would have called Peter and then realized the news would have spread that Peter had just healed a paralyzed man in the nearby town of Lydda. Also, they would have heard that Peter, James and John had accompanied Jesus when Jesus had raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. So, he was an obvious choice. And after Peter presented Tabitha alive to them the saints and widows shared the good news of what God had done resulting in many new believers.

I think it is obvious that the church in Joppa individually and collectively were following the example and teachings of Jesus to serve others and the church grew. But that was thousands of years ago. What about since then? Our hymn of preparation "True Evangelical Faith Cannot lie Sleeping is based on words written by Menno Simons an early Anabaptist leader. It shows that acts of service e.g., clothing the naked comforting the sorrowful, feeding the hungry and sheltering the destitute were very important to the early Anabaptists.

Now let's jump almost 500 years to... today. Are we still following the instructions and example of Jesus of serving others rather than ourselves? I think we are finding ways individually and collectively to use our gifts and resources to serve others. Some of us have found ways to use our gifts in serving others directly through our work and/or volunteer involvements. Some of us, even are using our sewing gifts to help others like Tabitha did.

Many of us support organizations like House of Friendship, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, and the Working Centre to help the needy. So does this story have anything to say to us today other than "keep up the good work?"

I will share two of my ideas and hopefully others will share theirs' in worship response time. I was impressed with the importance of each person in this story - not only Tabitha, but also Peter, the two disciples that fetched him, and all the other saints and widows, each of them playing their part contributed to new believers. I wonder how we might help each other identify our gifts, identify where we are already using them, and discern where God is calling us to use them either in continuing what we are doing or to serve in new ways.

And secondly, I wonder how we can build on the work we did with Betty Pries in discerning how and where God is calling us collectively to use our gifts and resources. I think we lost some momentum with the pandemic and I wonder if it might be time to revisit our action plans.

In conclusion I would like to leave you with the words from 1 Peter 4:8-11. I particularly like the assurance that God will provide the strength we need to use our gifts in service.

⁷ 8 Most important of all, you must sincerely love each other,
because love wipes away many sins.

9 Welcome people into your home
and don't grumble about it.

10 Each of you has been blessed with one of God's many wonderful gifts
to be used in the service of others.
So use your gift well.

11 If you have the gift of speaking, preach God's message.
If you have the gift of helping others,
do it with the strength that God supplies.

Everything should be done in a way that will bring honor to God
because of Jesus Christ,
who is glorious and powerful forever. Amen.

Our hymn of Response highlights many ways God calls us by name to use our gifts. The final verse invites our response.

Will You Come And Follow Me
If I But Call Your Name?
Will You Go Where You Don't Know
And Never Be The Same?
Will You Let My Love Be Shown,
Will You Let My Name Be Known,
Will You Let My Life Be Grown
In You And You In Me?

Will You Leave Yourself Behind
If I But Call Your Name?
Will You Care For Cruel And Kind
And Never Be The Same?
Will You Risk The Hostile Stare
Should Your Life Attract Or Scare?
Will You Let Me Answer Prayer
In You And You In Me?

Will You Let The Blinded See
If I But Call Your Name?
Will You Set The Prisoners Free
And Never Be The Same?
Will You Kiss The Leper Clean,
And Do Such As This Unseen,
And Admit To What I Mean
In You And You In Me?

Will You Love The 'You' You Hide
If I But Call Your Name?
Will You Quell The Fear Inside
And Never Be The Same?
Will You Use The Faith You've Found
To Reshape The World Around,
Through My Sight And Touch And Sound
In You And You In Me?

Lord, Your Summons Echoes True
When You But Call My Name.
Let Me Turn And Follow You
And Never Be The Same.
In Your Company I'll Go
Where Your Love And Footsteps Show.
Thus I'll Move And Live And Grow
In You And You In Me.