

Our bulletin doesn't lie. We're in our 3rd week of Lent. Today we continue learning about how we cultivate a closer walk with God. We've talked about corporate worship and prayer. We've talked about studying the word. Was anyone been able to start reading 5 verses a day this past week?

Today we're going to talk about the third essential practice of Christian living which is serving. The words serve, serving, service, and servant appear over 1000 times in the Bible. We hear all throughout the Bible that we are the servants of God. The Book of Joshua reaches its dramatic conclusion as a very old Joshua says to his leaders in chapter 24:14-15.

“So now, revere the Lord. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the Lord.” Say that last part with me.

Joshua's primary charge to Israel before he dies? Serve the Lord!

But what does that mean? To serve the Lord? We were created to serve God by doing his work and his will in this world. God's design for working in the world is through people. We are called to be his light, share his love, and spread the good news of Jesus. We are called to embody God's love and justice. We are called to bring healing and help to others.

In Genesis chapter 6 God looks at the world he created and is heartbroken. God sees evil and humans committing violence against others. God regrets that humans were created. Knowing that injustice and evil exists leaves God heartbroken. Look at the world today? Still so full of pain, brokenness, poverty, injustice. The very things that move God with compassion. Things that make God cry out as in Isaiah 6:8? “Whom should I send, and who will go for us?” Who like Isaiah will say, “I'm here; send me.”

Many Christians think that just going to church, praying, reading the bible, and refraining from evil is all that is needed. But all throughout scriptures, God is calling us to do good. To practice justice, kindness, and love. Isaiah 1:11-13 says:

What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the Lord. I'm fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from you, this trampling of my temple's courts? Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me. New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—I can't stand wickedness with celebration!

Yes, the Israelites were rendering to God their gifts, their offering, their prayers and their songs, but they neglected rendering justice, mercy, and kindness.

Later in vs 17 Isaiah adds. "learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow."

Micah, a prophet living during Isaiah's time said this in Micah 6:8.

He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

This theme is repeated again in Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.

Even in our Pledge of Allegiance we agree to be a nation seeking "Liberty and Justice for all".

How can a follower of Christ not have concern for justice or mercy for the vulnerable, the weak, the marginalized, the poor?

Jesus devoted much of his time to ministry with the poor, the marginalized, the second class. He ministered to peasant people, those with leprosy, and those who were mentally and physically ill. At the final judgment, Jesus taught that judgement will be based on providing food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned and welcoming the foreigner. Because this is the same as doing these things for Jesus.

John Wesley was committed to holding in tension the call to conversion and personal piety with a call to be engaged in transforming society. True holiness was not just about personally refraining from evil and doing good as an individual. It needed to involve loving neighbor enough to both see that they knew the transforming power of Jesus and ensure that they had adequate food, clothing, health care, and education.

Early Methodists were known for starting schools and health clinics. In the US they started public schools, colleges & universities, hospitals & clinics, orphanages and day care programs. They launched ministries for the homeless, feeding programs for the hungry, and job training for the unemployed. Being in service is part of the DNA of being a United Methodist. As United Methodist we are responsible to speak up for those who are vulnerable and marginalized. Following Christ means being asked to care for the marginalized, the vulnerable, the poor, and the powerless – those Jesus referred to as “the least of these.

The central ethic of Christian faith is love. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love expressed by doing to others what we would want them to do to us. Love is not just a feeling, but a way of living and being. Love is practiced towards others and seeks the good of others. Love blesses, encourages, cares for, and serves others. Justice, loving kindness, and practicing love are intertwined. To do justice is to practice kindness. To practice kindness is to express love and justice.

The Hebrew word for kindness is hesed. It appears over 240 times in the Old Testament. At times, it is translated as mercy or steadfast, covenant love. Hesed is often used to describe God’s love for humanity. It may be a struggle for us to see how we can have an impact on injustice in the world. One thing we can do every day is make kindness a goal.

Every day kindness is possible, but it means being intentional and determined. It requires practice. Each day in our prayer time, which we are now doing daily right? What if we offered ourselves to be God's instruments of healing, justice, mercy, and love? What if we prayed a variation of Isaiah's prayer? "Here I am, Lord, send me"? But when you do, be ready for God's prompting and response.

There's was a young girl. Age 14. Her name was Mary. She was visited by an angel named Gabriel and given the greatest task of all time, the task of being the mother of God's Son. She had many reasons to say no. Instead, Mary said in Luke 1:38. "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.". Can you imagine what would happen if that became our daily prayer? How our communities would change if every one of us here started our day on our knees saying "Here I am, Lord, do with me whatever you want?"

Doing good works purely for others and not for anything in return, that's something that blesses and heals the giver. The Mayo clinic did a study on volunteers. Here are some benefits they discovered. Reduced risk of depression. Better physical and mental fitness. Lower stress levels. Isn't that all part and parcel of that more abundant life that Jesus promised for those who do what God asks of them?

Serving others shapes us spiritually. It rubs off on us, making us more loving even when we're not feeling it. We are changed.

The call to service and kindness is typically lived out in everyday small ways. Like noticing someone who needs an encouraging word, a kind smile, or even a simple hello. How much of a difference can this make?

One day, Kevin Hines visited the Golden Gate Bridge. His goal was to jump from it and take his own life. He walked towards the bridge, telling himself that if even one person looked at him or smiled, he would not jump. No one smiled or looked at him. So, he jumped. No one typically survives that jump, but Kevin did. And the minute his body left the bridge, he regretted jumping. But now we have his story an example of how a simple kind look or smile could really make a difference. Most opportunities for service and kindness unplanned...really, they are interruptions.

Now it's time to set some goals. Take a look around for a minute. What if everyone person in this room decided to pursue acts of kindness each week. How many acts of kindness do you think we should try to pursue each week? Yep 5, Let's think about what that number could look like! Our worship attendance is averaging 128 between all services, including online attendees. Let's do some math. 5 acts of intentional kindness each week times 52 weeks is 260 acts of intentional kindness per person. For our church that would about 34,000 intentional acts of kindness a year.

Let's look at our hands again. Make a clenched fist with your dominant hand. This represents the importance of serving others through this church. Look at the unclenched hand. This is the 5 acts of kindness that we will pursue each week.

Several years ago, three women at a church in Kansas City noticed that their furnishings ministry was receiving a large number of requests for children's beds. They looked at this more closely. They learned that hundreds of kids in Kansas City did not have a bed of their own. Kids were sleeping on couches and even the floor. Don't you think that a good night's sleep would be important for a child to do well in school? They did too. They felt called to start a program that helped provide beds to kids from low-income families. Not only did they ask for help from their local church, they also worked with the schools and social service organizations. They were able to provide new frames, box springs, mattresses, pillows, sheets, and blankets. Their vision was to make sure that every child in Kansas City had their own bed. As of the Summer of 2019, their ministry had provided almost 4700 beds to kids in need. All because 3 women said to God, "Here we are, Lord, use us."

Let's serve in and through our church. How will our lives be different if all of us are more intentional in our pursuit of serving God by serving others? How will our community be different? We can do this my friends! In fact, we were created for service!