

THE GIFT OF SERVICE

January 21, 2007/Crossroads, La Paz, Mexico/Pastor Joyce Anderson-Reed

(For those of you who have the book *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, I encourage you to re-read *Purpose #4: You Were Shaped for Serving God*. Much of this sermon was based around ideas from this part of the book.)

Many years ago, a film called *The Man Who Played God*, was released. The main character was a prominent, rich musician who became bitter and cynical because he was losing his hearing. Not only did he turn his back on his friends, but he also turned his back on God.

He moved into a penthouse where he began to learn the art of lip reading. From his penthouse window overlooking a park, he would look through a set of high-powered binoculars and try to read people's lips.

One day he concentrated on a young man whose lips were moving in a prayer. He determined what it was the young man was praying for and then dispatched his butler to deliver it to him. On another occasion he read the lips of a woman who was telling another about something she needed and wanted desperately. Again, the wealthy musician saw to it that the need was met.

Each time he performed one of these services, the cynical musician would look heavenward and laugh in God's face. He found it laughable that he was playing God but didn't even believe in God.

But as time went by, and his eccentric method of meeting people's needs continued, something strangely wonderful began to happen. The man who played God, found God. Through the game he was playing—the game of serving people's needs—the very God he didn't believe in became real to him. (page 283-284, *A World of Stories* by William J. Bausch, 23rd Publications, CT)

This morning we're going to talk about the Gift of Service. How does God work *through us* to meet the needs of others?

And Pastor David and I want you to have a Biblical view, a theological view, of what service actually means. We don't want you to do a task at Crossroads just to get something done, or to fill an empty slot, or because someone guilted you into it. We want you to understand that service is integral to the Christian life.

Romans 7:4 tells us that we are saved to serve. This verse says "*It is he who saved us and chose us for his holy work, not because we deserved it but because that was his plan.*"

God didn't save us *by* service, but *for* service, for his holy work. In God's kingdom, you have a place, a purpose, a role, a function to fulfill. Because of this, your life has great significance and value. (Purpose Driven Life, page 228)

In some churches in China, they welcome new believers by saying "Jesus now has a new pair of eyes to see with, new ears to listen with, new hands to help with, and a new heart to love others with." (Purpose Driven Life, page 230)

As you serve, you will lead others to praise God.

I Peter 4:10-11 says this:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

So one simple definition of service might be this:

**SERVICE IS THE ABILITY TO HELP OTHERS
BY AIDING THEM IN PRACTICAL WAYS
SO THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE PRAISED.**

Jesus is our primary role model for serving others. In Matthew 20:26-28 we read this:

Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

How often do you put the needs of others before your own?
How often do you think about becoming someone else's slave?

Service is not focusing on my needs but focusing on whose needs can I meet.

Whose needs can I meet?

Do you *ever* ask that question? (Purpose Driven Life, page 231)

What would happen if each person that walked through the door of Crossroads this morning asked: whose needs can I meet this morning?

What would be accomplished before everyone went home?

Would the lonely person discover a new friend?
Would the depressed person find hope?
Would the sick person find healing?
Would the Sunday School program have a new teacher?
Would the coffee hour treat sign-up be filled for the next six months?
Would all the trash get picked up and thrown away?
Would someone volunteer to learn the computer program and sound board?
Would someone provide transportation for a guest that walked to church?

Whose needs can I meet this morning?

Crossroads could look radically different at the end of every Sunday morning if we each came to worship willing to answer that question before we went home.

But a word of caution, mixed in with a word of hope: a heart for service doesn't usually happen overnight. Like a muscle, service is an area of our character that needs to be strengthened and exercised through practice. The more we serve, the more we grow in Christ. We can read our Bible every hour every day. We can go to every Bible Study offered. But unless we apply this Biblical knowledge through acts of service, we will stagnate.

For example, you watch baseball on TV for years. You can read about baseball players and all their statistics. You can study playbooks so that you understand every aspect of the game. But it is only when you actually get on a field and attempt to play baseball, that you will actually have a first-hand knowledge of the game. What it feels like to have a ball sting into your glove. The thrill of sliding into third base as the outfielder is whipping the ball to the pitcher to the third baseman to tag you out. Smacking a homerun out of the stands.

Playing baseball instead of just reading about it, or watching it, is a whole 'nother game.

So it is with Christian service. I grew up in the church. I read and heard stories and sermons about people helping people all my life. But one year it all became extremely real.

When I was 18-years-old I went on my first mission trip to the Appalachia Mountains of West Virginia. These mountain communities are considered some of the poorest in the U.S. I and a team of 6 other teenagers helped to repair the home of a 70-year-old black woman. I climbed up on a roof and learned about roll-roofing. I painted her house. We rebuilt her sagging back porch. But what is still vivid in my mind, is this little old lady's beaming face as she danced a jig on that porch at the end of the week. It was God radiating from her heart through our selfless acts of service. Me and a bunch of teenagers had changed her life . . . and at the same time, changed ourselves as well.

That was the day that God became tangible and totally real in my life. And it happened because I put someone else first, and myself last. I let God work through me to change someone else's life.

This is not always easy to do. Developing a servant's heart requires attitude adjustments, sometimes major ones! What do I mean? Let's look at some characteristics of a person who serves.

People who serve are faithful. They don't leave a job half-done. They finish what they start. Because remember, service points people back to God. People should praise God as a result of the service performed. Perseverance to finish a task can sometimes require a lot of prayer! How many of you have ever gotten mired in a task, and it turned out to be harder, longer, more frustrating than you first imagined? Instead of one week, it was turning into 6 weeks. Instead of having all the tools on hand, you needed to go out and purchase 3 more, plus replacing the one that broke in the middle of the project—one that you couldn't find anywhere in La Paz. Instead of enjoying the people you were serving, you became resentful of them for having this need in the first place. Why couldn't they get their act together and fix their own problems? Ever been there?

Modeling faithfulness to complete a job is not always a mountain-top experience. But it's important to finish. Too many people have had the experience of someone quitting on them. Of someone giving up on them. Of someone pulling out on them and leaving unfinished business behind.

When you complete a task for someone, not only might it restore his or her faith in humankind, it also might restore his or her faith in God. If I can trust you, maybe I can also find the courage to trust God. People who serve are faithful.

Second, people who serve do seek celebrity status! People should be praising God, not you. You should not be promoting or calling attention to yourself. Your goal is not to have a new title or to hang a plaque on the wall lauding your achievements. Service is not me-centered, but other-centered; and ultimately, God-centered.

Third, people who serve base their identity in Christ. This means that you are so secure in your relationship with Jesus, that you don't have to prove your worth to anyone else. You willingly accept jobs that others might consider beneath them. You're not worried about what other people might think of you. You don't need constant approval. You're completing a work that God has called you to do.

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen said, *"In order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick to others . . . thus we become free to be compassionate."*

When our identity is in Christ, then we are freed from the expectations of others, and that allows us to really serve others best. (ideas in preceding paragraphs about characteristics of a servant are from Purpose Driven Life, pages 262-269)

So, let's recap for a minute:

God saved us through Jesus Christ and chose us for his holy work, for service.

Service is helping others in practical ways, so that in all things God may be praised.

Service is not about what *I* want or need, but asking "Whose needs can I meet today?"

Service is something we need to do regularly, in order for us to grow and mature as Christ-like people.

People who SERVE

**finish what they start (Faithfulness),
keep low profiles (are not celebrities),
and base their identity in Christ.**

So, how do you begin? How do you implement a life of service? How do you decide where to serve, what to do, or whom to serve?

First, God may literally drop an opportunity to serve right into your lap. It will be an obvious need, sometimes a desperate need, and you are the person in the right time at the right place to meet that need. Can you walk away from the opportunity? Yes. Although it might haunt you to do so. Do you always have the resources to meet this opportunity? Maybe, maybe not, but if you say *yes*, and step out in faith, resources always show up! God will provide what you need.

What does a God-opportunity look like? Ask Dhorea to share how she began the breakfast program in El Centenario. Ask Milton how he acquired the land that Crossroads now sits on? Ask KC and Ryan how they happened to be playing in the praise band today?

God can show up, quite literally, at your doorstep. When he does, are you ready to say *yes* and serve?

Second, an opportunity to serve may come through experimentation. Sometimes you have to try something, to find out if you're good at it or not. (Purpose Driven Life, page 250) For example, Pastor Rick Warren says he never thought of himself as a teacher and therefore never sought out teaching opportunities in the church. But one day a leader in the church asked him to temporarily fill a Sunday School teacher position. Nervous and doubtful, Rick accepted the challenge, and then discovered that he had an aptitude for it.

Pastor David used to work as a Program Director at a Christian Camp. During the summer, the camp offered programs for youth, as well as people with Special Needs. David had never worked with Special Needs people. In fact, the whole idea of it freaked him out. But in order to train his counselors, he also had to do it himself. And as he began to work in this area, David began to develop a love for special needs people. And he realized that he even had a personality that worked well with these people. That didn't mean it wasn't hard; that it wasn't challenging, but if he hadn't tried, he never would have discovered that he could serve in this capacity.

But Joyce, you might ask, What happens if it doesn't work out? I try teaching the preschool Sunday School class, and instead of getting excited about puppets, finger paint and singing Jesus Loves Me, I leave each week with a raging headache and a desire to become a national spokesperson for birth control . . . If something like this happens, *don't* write yourself off as a failure! You call it an experiment. One that did not achieve the desired results, so you leave that one behind, and try something else instead.

That's the beauty of being in a small, informal, non-traditional faith community like Crossroads. You're not locked into doing something for the rest of your life, for 3 years, or even for 6 months. You can try something for 2 weeks, and if it tears you down more than it builds you up, then you probably are not serving in the area God has called you. And then, you try something else instead. Through trial and error, you can discover an area of service.

Third, another way to discern an opportunity for service, is to ask yourself a variety of questions:

- What do I enjoy doing the most?
- Where do I feel most fully alive?

- Do I like routine or variety?
- Do I prefer serving with a team or by myself?
- Do I want a short-term or long-term commitment?
- Am I comfortable in front of people, or prefer to be behind the scenes?
- Am I an introvert, or an extrovert?

These types of questions can often lead you to discern what type of ministry you'd prefer. If you love to cook, maybe you'd like to coordinate the church dinners. If you have a heart for hungry people, you might get involved in the food pantry or a breakfast program. If you love to meet new people, you might greet all the visitors and invite them to sign the guest book. If you love to sing or play an instrument, you might join the worship team. If you love to work with computers, you might learn the Media Shout program that projects our order of worship each week. If you love construction work, you may get involved in remodeling or building homes for disadvantaged families. All of these and more are ways that God can use you to serve him.

Last week David reminded us that the vision of Crossroads is *Offering the Living Water of Jesus Christ with Thirsty People*. What does it mean to Offer the Living Water? How do we begin to live out this vision in our day to day lives as a community of faith?

It all begins with service. How we begin to meet the needs of others around us.

1. God might put a need directly in front of your path.
2. God might invite you to experiment, to find out through trial and error where you're gifted to serve.
OR
3. God might encourage you to look deep inside at the passions of your heart, and through asking yourself questions, allow you to match your passions to your area of service.

Let me close with this story:

A man named Sundar became a convert to Christianity and decided to stay in India to be a missionary and bear witness to Jesus. One late afternoon, Sundar was traveling on foot high in the Himalaya Mountains with a Buddhist monk. It was bitter cold and the night was coming on. The monk warned that they were in danger of freezing to death if they did not reach the monastery before the darkness fell.

It so happened that as they crossed over a narrow path above a steep cliff, they heard a cry for help. Deep down in the ravine a man had fallen, and he lay wounded. His leg was broken and he couldn't walk. So the monk warned Sundar, "Do not stop. God has brought this man to his fate. He must work it out by himself. That is the tradition. Let us hurry on before we perish." But Sundar replied, "It is my tradition now that God has brought me here to help my brother. I cannot abandon him." So the monk set off alone through the snow, which had started to fall heavily.

Sundar climbed down to where the wounded man was. Since the man had a broken leg, Sundar took a blanket from his knapsack and made a sling out of it. He got the man into it and hoisted him onto his back, then began the painful and arduous climb back up the path. After a long time, drenched with perspiration, he finally got back to the path, struggling to make his way through the increasingly heavy falling snow. It was dark now, and he had all he could do to find the path. But he persevered, and although faint from fatigue and overheated from exertion, he finally saw the lights of the monastery.

Then he nearly stumbled and fell. Not from weakness; he stumbled over an object lying in the path. He bent down on one knee and brushed the snow from the body of the monk, who had frozen to death within sight of the monastery. And there, kneeling on one knee in the snow, Sundar said aloud to himself the Scripture passage from Luke 9:24 “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” And he understood what Jesus meant and was glad that he had decided to “lose his life” for another.

Years later, when Sundar had his own disciples, they asked him this question: “Master, what is life’s most difficult task?” And Sundar replied, “To have no burden to carry.” (page 323-324, A World of Stories by William J. Bausch, 23rd Publications, CT)

What people has Jesus placed before your eyes?

What burdens has God placed on your heart?

Where is God calling you to serve?

Let us pray . . .

Lord God,

Thank you for saving us through the blood of Jesus Christ. Thank you for placing inside each one of us a desire to serve you, and to serve others. We pray now, in the wisdom and power of your Holy Spirit, that you might show each of us a way to serve you more faithfully. Whether the task is big or small, it doesn’t matter Lord, as long as we recognize it, and pursue it with passion. Unleash our potential, God. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, willing hands, ready feet. Practical needs. Spiritual needs. Grow our hearts to say “Yes! Yes! Yes!” when the opportunity to serve you is before us.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us what a servant’s life was all about, Amen.

This morning we’re going to close with an energetic, rousing song that I hope will cause you to clap, move your feet, maybe even dance if you get wild enough. But the message of the words is even more important:

*Every move I make, I make in You
You make me move Jesus
Every breath I take I breathe in You
Every step I take I take in You
You are my way Jesus
Every breath I take, I breathe in You*

*Waves of mercy, waves of grace
Everywhere I look, I see Your face
Your love has captured me
Oh, my God, this love how can it be?*

This is what service is all about.
Captured by the love of God so that
Jesus is in us, with us, through us
And others praise His name.