



I BELONG TO A SERVING COMMUNITY

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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No. 3: The Value of Community
Scripture: Galatians 5:13-15, Luke 4:18-19,
Matthew 20:28

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of glory as we hear your word proclaimed, help us to lay aside all that prevents us from seeking your kingdom, so that we can give all that we have to knowing you better. Through Christ our Savior, AMEN.

Imagine being part of a community where people remember your birthday, where they visit you when you are sick. Where they rejoice when you are glad and comfort you when you are sad. Where they help you to follow Christ and gently correct you when you wander from the path of righteousness.

Well that is a description of what God calls his church to be. Another way of exposing this is to say: **I BELONG TO A SERVING COMMUNITY.**

God's desire for Autumn Ridge is found in Paul's words when he writes, **"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:13)**

That's God's ideal but there are two obstacles that make it difficult to belong to a serving community.

The first obstacle is inside us.

By nature we are selfish and belonging to a serving community requires us to be selfless.

Paul acknowledges this when he writes, **"In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)**

The only way we can achieve that is if God changes our nature by placing his Spirit inside us.

Leonard Bernstein, the great conductor, was once asked, "What is the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play?" He replied, "Second fiddle. Plenty of people want to play first but if no one plays second we have no harmony."

The second challenge to belonging to a serving community **is outside us.**

We live in a society in which few desire to be a servant.

Imagine a young girl saying, "When I grow up I want to be a servant to important people."

We would tell her to aim higher.

I recently watched a marvelous series on Netflix called "Downton Abbey". It is about a Duke and his aristocratic family who live in their ancestral home in Edwardian England.

It was just 100 years ago but it seems like another world. The ladies of the house had their own maid who brings them breakfast in bed, dresses them, brushes their hair and does everything for them.

The Duke has his own valet who presses his clothes, puts on his cufflinks and makes sure his master looks magnificent.



There is an incredible contrast between life upstairs and downstairs. The gentry live a life of ease. The servants put in long hours of drudgery at very little pay. Although it is a great story I certainly don't want to go back to those days.

If we are honest most of us have to admit that we don't want to be servants. We want to be masters.

We are happy to say, "It's your serve" not "It's my serve." We want to be successful, and in our society that excludes the idea of being a servant. The epitome of the American dream is to move from log cabin to White House. To stay forever a servant is an admission of failure.

It is all very well for Jesus to say, **"The greatest among you shall be your servant."** (Matthew 23:11)

But for that to happen Christ has to change the way we see the world.

The reality is that it has always been a struggle to be a servant.

Perhaps we think that if we had walked and talked with Jesus it would have been easier.

But at the end of Jesus' ministry after his disciples had been taught the art of service for three years the mother of James and John comes to Jesus and requests, **"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."** (Matthew 20:21)

Did James and John get embarrassed?

Did they say, "Mom we want to be servants?" Not at all.

The other disciples were certainly indignant but only because they wanted these top jobs for themselves.

This command to serve one another has always been a rebuke to our social ambitions.

So today we are going to let the word of God and the Son of God and the Spirit of God transform us into a servant that blesses those around us.

There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

First let's look at **OUR PATTERN FOR SERVICE.**

The Lord Jesus explained, **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many."** (Matthew 20:28)

Consider how incredible this is.

Here is the Son of God, the Lord of glory, the heir of all things, describing his life's goal to serve.

Jesus is our model for service when he gets down on his knees to wash the disciples' feet.

That was the job of a slave, not the Savior of the world.

And God wants us to be just like his Son.

For scripture tells us, **"Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son."** (Romans 8:29)



But how are we to be like Jesus?

We are to be like Jesus in what he was.

He was the Son of God. He was holy.

We through faith in Christ become sons of God and through our union with him we become partakers of his holiness.

We are to be like Jesus in what he did.

Peter said to Cornelius, **"You know . . . how God anointed Jesus as Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."** (Acts 10:38)

We are to do good to all, especially those of the household of faith. Andrew

Carnegie spoke about "doing real and permanent good." Jesus did that and so can we.

Then **we are to be like Jesus in what he said.**

He spoke truthfully. He spoke kindly to those in need.

He spoke firmly to those deserving rebuke.

He spoke words of eternal life to those who were lost.

So here are the three marks of a servant of God.

We are to be like Jesus.

We are to act like Jesus and we are to speak like Jesus.

You do that and I am so grateful. Your desire to be like Jesus makes the ministry of this church possible.

Now let's examine **OUR PROGRAM FOR SERVICE.**

Jesus spelled it out in his home synagogue in Nazareth when he said, **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** (Luke 4:18-19)

Three times Jesus said, I am going to preach, I am going to proclaim.

Here we see that part of serving others is to talk.

So what are we to talk about?

We are to talk about the gospel.

We are not just giving good advice but good news.

To whom are we to talk?

Those who desperately need to hear these glad tidings.

Jesus tells there are four particular groups of people that we are to serve.

First we are **to reach the bankrupt.**

We are to, **"Preach good news to the poor."**

That word poor has two meanings.

There is economic poverty and spiritual poverty and God is concerned about both.

The church is to do all we can to help those who don't have enough to eat and who don't have the financial resources to live.

As a congregation we try and meet these needs through IN HIS NAME Food Bank, through our Backpack for Kids Program and through our Benevolent Fund.

In two weeks we are Filling a Truck for the Salvation Army. The items we donate will be sold and the money put towards the significant social programs the Salvation Army do in Rochester.

However, we also recognize there are people earning a million dollars a year who are spiritually bankrupt.

We also have a great message for them.

It is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The good news is that the gospel embraces us when we have nothing to offer.

It meets our needs when we are helpless and hopeless.

Then **we are to reach the bound.**

Jesus said, **"He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners."**

Our second Bold Initiative is Next Chapter. We go into the jails and proclaim freedom to the prisoners. When they have served their sentence there are four homes in Southeast Rochester where men and women can stay and be discipled as they reenter society.



How glad we are for those who are part of our fellowship, who made mistakes in the past but have now found freedom in Christ.

There is a strong youth section at Next Chapter where we reach out to children at risk to make sure they don't get into trouble and so waste precious years of their life in prison.

But the bound are not only those in jail.

Plenty of people who have never broken the law are in bondage to Satan and they too need the liberating power of Jesus.

And then **we are to reach the blind.**

Jesus was sent to proclaim, **"Recovery of sight for the blind."**

Throughout her history the church has had a particular concern for those without physical eyesight.

I used to be on the Board of a blind mission.

We would go to a rural area of India, set up a tent and some operating tables and hundreds of blind people would come.

An ophthalmologist would remove their cataracts and an optician would give them new glasses and many who came blind left being able to see.

But there are plenty with 20/20 vision who are spiritually blind. Paul explains that, **"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel or the glory of Christ."**
(2 Corinthians 4:4)

Some are blinded by prejudice, or addiction, and God wants his people to be his agents in delivering these precious people from their blindness.

The way we help people in darkness is by holding up the light of the gospel. That light may be a stand for biblical morality and sexual purity. It may be speaking out for the right of the unborn. It could be campaigning for the unemployed or welcoming the immigrant.

In this way we provide the light of Christ.

Then **we are to reach the bruised.**

Jesus was called, **"To release the oppressed."**

This has special reference to those who have been the object of Satan's attacks. They have been overwhelmed by his efforts to batter, bruise and banish them.

They bear the marks of sin and suffering.

We are to serve these people with love and care, for the gospel spells relief to the downtrodden.

We will need great patience because hurt people often hurt those who try to help them. But we will endure the pain and frustration because Jesus did.

Now to serve people at this deep level means we must be aware of what's happening in their lives.

That knowledge of need comes about in a small group. That is why small groups are so important to us at Autumn Ridge.

God has given all of us gifts to use in the service of others. And that is why we urge you to be part of a small group. It is not hard to join one.

Take out your Welcome Card and write on it that you would like to be part of a small group.

Provide your name, phone number and email and drop it in the offering bag.

We will get back to you and help you plug in.

Of course, we are not simply to serve in the church.

We are also to serve in the community and I am delighted as I move around the city to find Autumn Ridgers serving others on the Library Board or the Chamber of Commerce or at Rotary or Kiwanis or on the School Board, coaching soccer, basketball or football.

Working with the Scouts or the Boys and Girls Club, getting involved in the political process.

This is how God's people can say "I belong to a serving community."

Now let's consider **OUR PERIOD FOR SERVICE.**

How long are we to serve?

The answer is as long as the day of grace lasts.

Our job like Jesus is, **"To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (v 19)**

When is that year? Paul tells us.

**"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."
(2 Corinthians 6:2)**

Today is the day we are to serve one another.

Not next week or next year or when we have more time. In other words we never retire from being a servant.

It doesn't stop when we become successful and have people serving us.

Being a servant does not preclude us from being ambitious. Every Christian should be the best they can be, for God deserves excellence. But even if we reach the top in our chosen field we are to lead with a servant's heart. Paul demonstrates that attitude.

He was the top apostle yet he begins his letters by writing, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ."

Our service will not even end in death.

It will continue in heaven where we will serve the Lord day and night before his throne.

Until then we serve God by serving others.

Let me tell you about an opportunity for a significant area of service that exists right now.

God has entrusted Autumn Ridge with lots of children. More than we have ever had before.

Here is the need.

We need 10 more servants to work with children at 7:00pm on Saturday nights.

We need 10 more servants at 10:30am on Sunday mornings.

And we need 10 more servants to help with Kids Club on Wednesday nights.

These children are waiting to receive the Gospel and God is asking, "Who will I send?"

If God is calling you or if you would like to know more, please indicate this on your Welcome Card and drop it in the offering bag or call the church office this week.

The fact is, your church needs you.

But I don't have the strength!

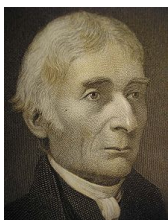
Yes you do because now we discover **OUR POWER FOR SERVICE**

Even though Jesus was the Son of God he needed to wait for the anointing and powering of the Holy Spirit before he began his ministry of service.

He didn't leave his home in Nazareth until he could say, "**The Spirit of the Lord is on me.**" (v 18)

Until we can say that, our service for others will be ineffective.

It was only after the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples at Pentecost that they began to really serve the city of Jerusalem by preaching and healing and sharing their resources. If we are serious about being a serving church we must ask for this spiritual power to be ours.



Etienne de Grellet was a French Quaker and missionary. This was his daily prayer, "I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any act of kindness I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Let me conclude by making three important points about our service. The first is that **helping others doesn't have to be hard.**

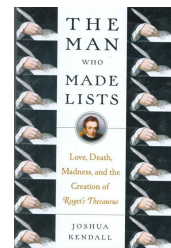
Think of those four men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus on a stretcher. All they did was hold the corner of a stretcher and yet that man was healed. We can all do that. We can grab the corner of a stretcher for somebody and take them to Jesus.

Second **there is a place of service for all of us irrespective of our personality.**

That was brought out to me in a book I read about Peter Mark Roget. He was the eminent 19th century physician, mathematician, inventor, writer, editor and chess whiz who is the author of Roget's Thesaurus.

He was an immensely shy boy and didn't enjoy spending time with people as an adult. But he had a keen sense of observation and loved to spend hours on his own making lists. These became the basis of his great literary work which is still used today.

Whoever you are God has a place of service for you.



Third **serving others will not always be an unqualified success.**

It wasn't for Jesus and it won't be for us. But that doesn't mean we should give up.

I have had my own share of disasters.

Some years ago I received a phone call one night.

A person who was greatly upset said, "I live in another state. I am here in Rochester to visit my mother. She's dying and I wonder if you would come and be with us. Her name is Mrs. Olson."

I said I would be right there. I was glad for this opportunity to serve. So I drove to Charter House, asked for Mrs. Olson and they gave me a room number. I went to the room and found this lady sitting in a chair fully dressed. I introduced myself. She told me her son was in the bathroom.

Frankly, it is always difficult in these situations where you don't know the people. I asked her how she was feeling. She replied, "Much better."

I thought, "The poor soul doesn't know how bad it is." Then she added, "I am going home."

I thought that is a lovely way to refer to heaven and began to talk about the home that God has prepared for those that love him. I always get worked up talking about heaven so I became more eloquent but I noticed that she was looking increasingly puzzled.

Suddenly I realized things didn't seem right.

Then I noticed her packed suitcase was beside her and I began to think maybe "home" means home after all.

At this point her son returned and asked who I was.

It was clear he hadn't called me.

I had visions of being arrested for entering Charterhouse under false pretenses and terrifying an old lady by telling her she was going to die. I quickly excused myself and rushed back to my car. I felt foolish and a failure. In desperation I looked at the piece of paper on which I had scribbled the information and saw that it wasn't Charter House at all but another nursing home in our community.

I eventually got there and discovered another Mrs. Olson.

I apologized to her son for my late arrival. We prayed, read scripture, and sang together. His mother entered the presence of her Savior that night and the family asked me to lead her funeral service a few days later.

An evening that had started as a disaster turned out all right in the end. I suppose the confusion was possible because a third of all Minnesotans must be called Olson!

Service is sometimes difficult and discouraging and even dangerous.

So why do we do it?

Because it gives great satisfaction.

We are making an eternal difference.

We are bringing pleasure to God who is the ultimate reason for our service in the first place.

But our greatest reward will come when one day we stand before Jesus and hear him say, **"Well done, good and faithful servant . . . come and share your master's happiness." (Matthew 25:21)**