

Service and Spirituality

by Megan Collins

Cleaning Toilets for Jesus?

“ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

Reflection

On the Discovery Channel there is a show called “Dirty Jobs.” Each week the show looks at what it considers to be the grossest, dirtiest jobs around. It’s one of those shows that, if you have a bad week at work, can help you put things in perspective. You may have had a long day, but at least you are not a leech trapper.

In our work outside of the church, we are often encouraged to do something that we feel we have abilities, talents, and energy for. We work with our high school students to help guide them to careers that they might find fulfilling. But somehow when it comes to the church our mindset changes. It is easy to think that work for the church must be boring or difficult.

Our work can be boring and difficult if we are not serving where we are gifted to serve. As we come to understand the work of the Holy Spirit, we learn in our passage from 1 Corinthians that each of us has been given a spiritual gift, an ability given to us to serve the Body of Christ. The passage assures us that we are given different gifts so that the ministry of the larger church, the “common good”, can be accomplished.

Frederich Buechner (a Christian theologian) wrote “vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” If we understand vocation to be not only our job, but how God uses us in our daily lives, then the activities that bring us energy and joy and at the same time meet a need of the world can be understood as the places where we are gifted and called to serve.

In God’s great wisdom, God has blessed each of us with different gifts. While one person may find great joy in serving in a soup kitchen, another might find energy in helping with the middle school youth. Some might look forward to their work as a hospital visitor, and others might like to cook meals for the church. This meeting of joy, giftedness and need finds its application not only in our work for the church but in our other activities as well.

Activity

Take some time today to reflect on what your spiritual gifts might be, what brings you joy in service, and how these gifts and interests could be used by God to reach out to the needs of the world. Don't overlook any gift as insignificant. In a church in Dayton, a group of women were wondering what they could possibly do for mission. They were not physically able to go on a mission trip or build a house. Today, this group of women sews, knits, crochets, and quilts for newborns and children in the hospital, older adults in the VA, cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, and soldiers serving in Iraq. Open yourself up to be used by God and watch to see what can happen!

Prayer

God, guide me by the work of your Spirit to discern what my gifts might be and how you might be calling me to serve. Amen.

Key Thought

Our work for the church and the world can bring us joy if we are serving where we are gifted and called to serve.

The Holy Spirit in a Hard Hat

“Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of the land to a good and broad land . . . so come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you.” (Exodus 3:7-12)

Reflection

One summer I took a group of middle school students on a mission trip. They spent 8 hours a day in the heat of a Florida summer pulling nails out of boards to be reused on a house build. Somehow, in the midst of the heat, mosquitos, and hard work, it was easy to miss that God was right there with us. But God met us there in middle-schoolers who labored on a home for a migrant worker family in need. In an unexpected place, in unexpected ways, the Spirit was at work helping these students develop a deeper, more mature faith. This didn't happen in a sanctuary or on a spiritual retreat, but in the Florida sun, covered in sweat and bug bites. God meets us in these unexpected places. For Moses in our passage from Exodus the Lord promises him, “I will be with you” as he helps his people escape from Egypt. It shouldn't surprise us when God meets us in the midst of service. It is easy to think we are all on our own out there, trying to save the world; but really it is God at work all the time, and we are merely invited along for the ride.

Activity

As you go throughout your day, be especially attentive to God's presence and work around you. Take notice of the little blessings that are often overlooked, and take a moment to thank God for God's amazing work in our lives.

Prayer

God of the Ages, you have created us and know us. You are with us each moment of our lives. Make me attuned to your presence and work around me, and show me how to partner with you. Amen.

Key Thought

God is at work in our lives and in our service.

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“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.’”
(John 13:3-5, 12-17)

Reflection

When we are very young, we learn by imitation. We learn to speak and to walk by imitating our caregivers. Then as we get older, we learn more complicated practices through imitation – like how to participate in social groups and how to love others. In our passage from John, Jesus washes the disciples’ feet to set an example of living in service to others. As you may have heard before, washing feet was a lowly job, the work of a servant. The feet of visitors were not kept clean in socks and shoes but instead were quite dirty from walking outside. As Jesus washes the disciples’ feet he sets the example that we are called to serve each other in this way.

One way we learn to follow God on our journey of faith is through imitation. We imitate the ways of Jesus, of the disciples, of the early church. We imitate modern church fathers and mothers who have walked in faith for years and have learned how to be servants along the way. To imitate Jesus is to become a servant to others. In serving others we can experience the work of the Spirit in our lives, transforming us into the disciples we are called to become.

Activity

This week, consider finding an opportunity to serve someone in a new way. Think about how Jesus might serve that person. Maybe it will be a family member or friend. Maybe it will be a stranger – or even someone you consider an enemy. Serving others is one of the ways we come to experience God more fully and to grow in our spirituality.

Prayer

Holy God, it is you who teach us to serve, you who show us the path of humility rather than pride. Help me today to see new ways to serve others, and by serving others, serve you. Amen.

Key Thought

In growing closer to God, we imitate Christ’s commitment to serving others.

Spirituality without Candles

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” (Matthew 7:24-26)

Reflection

The word “spirituality” for some might bring to mind some sort of hocus pocus, candle lighting, drum beating, group hug experience. And while this is not a description of spirituality as we understand it in the Presbyterian Church, there are aspects of spirituality, as it is traditionally understood, that may not be appealing to some.

Our experience of God’s Spirit can happen in many different ways, including in acts of service. Acting out God’s commands to serve in mission to those in need can be a spiritual experience of equal validity to quiet meditation. Both have value, and we can all benefit from trying things outside of our comfort zone, but if the idea of practicing spirituality leaves you a little uneasy, consider trying an act of service as a means of experiencing God’s presence.

Our passage from Matthew tells us that acting on God’s word is building our “house” on “rock.” To live out God’s call through Scripture to care for the poor and downtrodden is building our spiritual house on a strong foundation. This Spring our church had the opportunity to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. In the midst of those men and women building the house there were more than tool belts and friendly banter – you could truly feel the Holy Spirit at work in their midst as they installed dry wall and a roof. Their work was done out of faith and prayer, and as that house became a home you could feel the presence of God in that place.

Activity

The next time you participate in a service activity, think of it not only as mission but as a spiritual exercise. In your movements, conversations and work think about how God may be at work in you.

Prayer

Gracious God, help me to see acts of service as a practice of spirituality. Help me to experience your Spirit as I seek ways to serve you. Amen.

Key Thought

We can experience spirituality through service and mission.

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

“Teacher, which commandment is the greatest? [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Reflection

The placement of these two commands in Matthew speaks clearly to our calling as Christians. First and foremost, we love God with all our being. Secondly, we love others as we love ourselves. The gospel passage connects these two in a way that is undeniable. If we love God, we must love our neighbor.

We all know that this sounds easy enough, but in practice it proves difficult. We leave Sunday morning feeling built up to go out into the world as disciples of Christ. Then, even as soon as the parking lot, it all falls apart as we honk at someone who pulls in front of us. Or maybe we make it as far as the grocery store after church to pick up some lunch. And then the person in front of us has an item that needs a price check and we stand trapped in the check out line for ten minutes and cannot resist letting out a loud sigh. Or perhaps you make it past the grocery store with patience and love, only to come home and begin squabbling with your family.

We will never be perfect. Acknowledging this is part of who we are as Christians. But the gospel reminds us that we can't stop trying to love our neighbor, even if this seems difficult. It might be a metaphorical neighbor, someone you work with or know from other activities. Or it might actually be the person who lives next door. The person whose dogs bark, who doesn't always get their lawn mowed, and who still has a bale of hay in their yard left over from Halloween.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote “To show great love for God and our neighbor we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering.” It is not about how great our actions are toward our neighbors. It is instead our choice (sometimes a difficult choice) to love that makes the difference.

Prayer

God, help me to love. Help me to love my family, my neighbors, and especially those I find difficult to love. And as I love help me to know I love others because you first loved me. Amen.

Key Thought

Even when it is difficult, we are called to love others as Christ loved us.

Life in the Goldfish Bowl

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Reflection

Evangelism is not a word we Presbyterians are often comfortable with. Words like “witness” and “evangelism” often bring to mind street corner preachers handing out pamphlets with a condensed version of the gospel. Not that there is anything wrong with evangelists of this sort. But Presbyterians, at least in general, are more subtle in the ways they reach out to the world with the saving message of Jesus Christ.

This week’s readings have focused on how we grow closer to God and grow in our spirituality through acts of service. But the benefits of service are not only found in personal growth. They also act as a witness to the community around us. One of the big complaints we hear against Christians is that they don’t practice what they preach. People outside the church hear us preach about reaching out to those in need or forgiving one another, but then the news is full of church scandal and hypocrisy. We know this is because we are sinners, saved by the grace of God, and that the church will never be perfect. But our acts of service and mission show the world the true missional heart of the church.

Whenever you pick up a hammer and go volunteer for Habitat, or pick up your knitting needles to make a blanket for a child in the hospital, or bring your bowls to the kitchen to cook meals for those in need, or deliver a bag of food to a family who has fallen on hard times, your acts of service “shine before others.” When we reach out to those around us with acts of grace we don’t necessarily need to have all the right words to articulate our faith. Our actions and a simple explanation of why we do what we do reach out to the community in powerful ways.

Activity

Take a few minutes to reflect on acts of service you have participated in. Write them down, then next to them write ways they could be used by God to reach out to those who witness them. Celebrate with God the ways God uses our small efforts to make a difference.

Prayer

God, you use our works in ways we can only imagine. Help us to see our service as a way we share the gospel with those in our community. Amen.

Key Thought

Acts of service can help communicate the truth of the gospel to those around us.

Small Group Meeting: Service and Spirituality

1. Path of Community

Go around your group on each question and let everyone share their answers to this question:

- Is there a time when by serving God you felt closer to God?

2. Path of Learning

Today we will review. Discuss these questions in your group.

- Which of this week's readings/scriptures meant the most to you?
- How do you think service can help grow our spirituality?
- What are some obstacles to having a servant's heart?
- Are there ways our church is a witness to the community through service?

3. Path of Service

This is the week by which your group will ideally have taken part in a form of service to others. If you haven't done anything yet, here is your chance!

4. Path of Invitation

Discuss whether your group would like to continue meeting beyond Lent. A list of resources for study and discussion has been provided to your group leader. If you would like to continue, brainstorm some people you can invite to be part of your group. Commit to inviting them the next time you get together. If it seems better to wait, you might want to plan a social event to which you can invite newcomers who will join you for whatever you do next.

5. Path of Worship

Share any highs or lows from the week. After each person shares, the group may say together, "We share your prayer." Other options include participants taking turns in leading prayer, or having a time for silent prayer after all have shared.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. (You may wish to join hands for this!)

6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.