

“Service is our Prayer,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on October 25, 2009

Reading: Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.* ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii,* gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Sermon:

We’ve come to the last in my three part sermon series on our affirmation of faith, which says, “Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament and service is its prayer.” We say that service is our prayer. Now I could preach a whole sermon, a sermon series even, about the different ways we understand prayer--who we’re praying to, why we pray, what we expect may happen when we pray. And maybe I’ll do that sometime. But for now I’d say that “service is its prayer” means we are committed to putting our faith into action. We put as much emphasis here on how we live out our faith, as we do on what we believe. It’s a good thing to pray; but then get to work making your prayers real.

I wonder, how do you hear that word ‘service’? When I first began thinking about service, the first thing that came to mind was what we broadly call social action--going out into the world and taking a stand--marching on Washington, helping build a house through Habitat for Humanity, serving the hungry in our neighborhood at community meals, somehow being part of the change you wish to see in the world. All of these things are service, and I commend them to you. But they aren’t the only ways to serve.

And sometimes I worry that if you think the only way to serve is by doing something big and visible, and if you aren't able to do that right now, then you won't do anything at all.

I like that we say service is our prayer, because that implies that service is something we practice, that we try to do all the time, rather than something big we do every once in a while. Service as prayer is doing, as Mother Teresa said, "small things with great love." Service that is prayer is done for the right reason--not for attention or credit, but simply because you see need and want to help.

I don't know all the ways you are serving in this church and out in the community. But I'm grateful for what I see. Last winter, we had a number of snowy Sundays, and without being asked, one of you showed up here and started shoveling. And it seemed to me that you did it with joy. Another one of you is a devoted friend to one of our members who needs transportation. You provide this help quietly, without asking for recognition. Others of you teach our children, or put away tables and chairs, or serve as greeters on Sunday morning--welcoming folks who have not been here before. All of this is service.

When I lived in Washington, DC, I had a neighbor who was a member of the Presbyterian church. He was a good guy--he would go over to the church and help out, doing whatever was needed, and he did this with a happy heart. He liked to joke about this---he would say to me, "I was over at the church raking leaves for Jesus," or "folding newsletters for Jesus." He understood that whatever it was he was doing, whether it was a menial task or something bigger, he was serving something larger than himself. He was working for the greater good.

One of the beauties of church is that we are a community of people who are different from one another. Our backgrounds, our experiences aren't the same. We see the world from our own particular vantage point. Since we aren't all the same, we won't all do the same thing, or serve in the same way, and this is a blessing. Some of you are great cooks, and you take pleasure in baking special things for coffee hour and church suppers. Some of you roll up your sleeves and help clean up our building and grounds. Some of you get up your courage and travel to Washington, DC to stand for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Some of you serve on committees, and attend meetings, and stay until the end.¹ Some of you sing in the choir, or in the Spirit Band, or play an instrument in worship. And some of you, I imagine, wonder, "Am I spending my days on what matters?" You ask yourself, "What do I have to offer? How might I be of use?"

In the quote at the top of today's order of service, Albert Einstein says, "The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." It's okay, it's good even, to begin with questions, with seeking. Behind those questions, I believe, is a desire to be of use. And I hope that desire to serve is

¹ See responsive reading #728 by John Buehrens in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

imbedded in everything we do here. My hunch is that we have some work to do around this, we have a way to go to go before we make this a congregation where service is what is expected, is how we practice our faith, is what we all do. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, says, "Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time." We say service is our prayer. How are doing at that?

I never know why you might show up here on a given Sunday, and what exactly you are looking for. I don't need to know--I'm just glad you came, that we are here together. I do know that sometimes people need to just come to church--they need a place to come and just be, in order to heal or recover or restore something that is broken or missing. And I want us to always be a place, a sanctuary, where those who are weary can find rest, where your soul can find refreshment, where you can hear the good news that God loves you, just as you are, and that we love you and welcome you here.

There are times in any of our lives when we need to be taken care of. When you don't have anything left to give. So if you are in that place right now, please know that you are welcome here just as you are. You don't need to do anything to justify your existence or earn your keep. You may need some time to just be here, and I encourage you to take that time, and to ask for help. That's why we're here. Please don't keep your troubles to yourself--you let me know if you are struggling or in need. This community can help, and we are working on getting better at this. And when you are healing and becoming whole again, when you are ready, we'll ask you to help someone else.

At the start of this sermon series, preaching about love, I quoted Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who said that love is the central value of the religious life. He said, "Nowhere is this simple message more clearly stated than in the parable of the Good Samaritan... the one who showed mercy, who had compassion... was the heretic, the enemy, the man of wrong faith who did the right thing." That's why I chose the parable of the Good Samaritan for this morning, because it ties service right back to love.

Jesus was especially critical of the religious authorities of his day, who often seemed more concerned with their own well-being than with those in need or trouble. It's no accident that the two men who passed by the wounded man on the Jericho Road, were two religious men, a priest and a Levite.

Martin Luther King, preaching about this story, wondered about those religious folks, and why they didn't stop to help.² Maybe they were on the way to a church meeting, and didn't have time to stop. Maybe they were obeying their own purity laws, which said they couldn't touch another human within a day of a religious ceremony. Maybe they were on their way, King wonders, "to organize a 'Jericho Road Improvement

² Martin Luther King, Jr, "I've been to the Mountaintop," sermon delivered April 3, 1968, available online at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm

Association.’ ...Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.” Then he says,

“It’s possible that they were afraid... I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, ‘I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable.’ It’s a winding, meandering road.... a dangerous road. ...And so the first question that the priest asked — the first question that the Levite asked was, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

I have to confess that when I am confronted with situations like this, I often wonder, “What will happen to me? Is it safe, or a good idea, to give that person a ride or invite him inside the door?” We face questions like this every week here--as an urban church that hosts a food pantry and a drop in center for people living at the margins, we live in a tension between trying to be welcoming and hospitable and trying to assure some level of security. When confronted with someone in need, I try to assess the situation. Is the need real, or am I being played? Can and should I try to help? Am I being caring enough, or taking a foolish risk?

Oftentimes the answer is unclear; you just don’t know for sure. But Dr. King was right. We need to turn the question around, and worry at least as much about our neighbor, and ask, “If I don’t help, what will happen to him or her? Who will help my neighbor, if not me? We sometimes equate service with words like servant or servitude, and see service as somehow weak. But can you see that choosing to serve actually puts you in a position of strength? Choosing to act, to use what power you do have, is to say “this is something I can do; this is where I stand.”

Of course there are many ways to serve, and we won’t all serve in the same way. But please know this--we need you. This church needs you, this community needs you, what you have to offer. I ask you to reflect on how you might be of use, in this congregation, in this neighborhood, in the wider world. We need your help here. If we are going to welcome newcomers properly, we need people to serve as greeters on Sunday morning. We need people who are interested in working with me on worship to join the worship committee. We need some folks who are organized and interested in incorporating new folks to start a membership committee. We need people to sing in the choir and help prepare community meals and teach our children and to work for justice. I don’t want any of you to do too much--a healthy life is a balanced life. But I hope you will keep this question before you: “How might I serve?”

I know some of you may ask, “What is the point of the little bit that I can do? Will it make any difference at all?” To you I say, you need to have faith that what you have to offer is important and is enough. To you I say, hear these words from Dorothy Day, who helped found the Catholic Worker movement and worked closely with the poor:

“People say, ‘What is the sense of our small effort?’ They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”

There is a hymn that articulates this hope, this faith; that we are the builders of that shining city, the one prophets look toward, that exists in the time that is not yet, that time when peace and justice will reign. This hymn restores my faith, that what we do, imperfect and incomplete as it may be, is a step along the way; that our lives are for something, that our work will not be in vain. It says

And the work that we have builded
Oft with bleeding hands and tears
Oft in error, oft in anguish,
Will not perish with our years:
It will live and shine transfigured
In the final reign of right:
It will pass into the splendors
Of the city of the light.³

May we have that faith, that hope, that love.

Amen.

³ Felix Adler, “Hail the Glorious Golden City,” *Singing the Living Tradition* #140.