

The Power in Serving Others
Matthew 25:31-40

What I am about to say this morning is neither profound or unique to my personal experience, but from time to time we need to be reminded of the reality that there is great power found in serving others. Now I am not talking about power in the sense of the ability to control or rule over, I am talking about the power it has on the heart and soul of the one who serves.

How many of you, after making a significant effort to give of yourself to someone else with little or no expectation of anything in return, have felt that the experience was one that gave you far more in return than you felt you were able to give?

My first real mission trip was to Hazel Green, KY. I was probably around 12 or 13 and our youth group, along with the youth groups from two neighboring communities, rode an old yellow school bus into the hills of Eastern Kentucky for a 5 day work project at Hazel Green Academy. Hazel Green was a school for mountain children that had very little in terms of material support. They lived and worked at Hazel Green in exchange for an education. The best of the students continued their education at Berea College in Berea, KY where they were also able to work in exchange for a great education. That is still how Berea operates today.

The trip to Hazel Green was long, hot, and hard. The dorms were sparse and the shower facilities were rough. We awoke each day to worship, ate breakfast, worked until lunch, worked until dinner, and then cleaned up our work sites and dropped into bed. In five days I help lay a sidewalk, paint a dorm, and build a garage. I was dog tired, but on the way home in the Yellow School bus, had a sense of accomplishment I never knew until then. I never missed another opportunity for either a mission trip or a local project.

As a minister I have had the joy of working in 4 congregations who were already working hard for others, or who were open to trying. Habitat for Humanity has always been one of those projects that churches and individuals have loved to get involved with. There truly is nothing better than standing beside a family member who is working on their new home, or someone who is putting in their sweat equity for a home to be built later. A day at a Habitat site is one of the best things you can do for others, but an even better thing to do for yourself.

I have served churches which have completed or worked on over two dozen Habitat homes either locally or internationally. Without exception the experience has changed those who made the time and effort to participate. That is why that on many of the builds you see many of the same people. Once you are a Habitat junkie, you are in for life.

I see and hear the same kinds of stories from the adults and youth of Southport. When Barb and I were considering the move to Indianapolis, one of the things that cemented the call for me was your strong commitment to outreach

and ministry to the world from “our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.” Either a church gets it or they don’t. Southport gets it.

There are some very interesting studies that have recently come out about something new that the church is experiencing which has never happened before in history. Because of our diet and our quality of health care, people are living longer. This means that for the first time in history the church is now serving 5 very viable generations of people. From the Builder generation, Boomers, GenX, GenY, and Nexter the church is now trying to serve 5 distinct generations with 5 distinct attitudes about what the church should be a do.

It has been nearly 50 years since the Builder generation flexed its muscle for the first time in the church. These were the glory years of the church, the mid and late 50s. To fill a church all you had to do was open the doors. It was during this generation’s leadership that Southport was founded. The next three generations of the church were less about building and more about consuming. It is no accident that during the Boomer generation mega-churches came into being. These were the church equivalents of Walmart, with something for everyone. It was possible to attend and participate with little expected but your financial contribution.

The GenX and GenY’s saw the church as out of touch and wanted their own voices to be heard it every aspect of the church. Unfortunately the GenX and GenY had more of the characteristics of the Boomers than they would like to admit. They were not so much interested in building programs and having them provided for them.

The good news for many of us in the church is that the fifth generation, the Nexter’s, appear to have more of the characteristics of the Builder generation than any of the other three. They are willing to lead, to work, to make time and treasure available to the work of the church as long as it makes sense to them. This is a generation that truly wants to help change the world, and they seem to be ready to invest in it. More than “getting your hands dirty” on a meaningful work project now and then, this generation seems to have the energy and will to help rebuild the church to become viable once again to the world outside our walls. Some of that generation is present at Southport and they are beginning to help us redefine who we need to be.

For the Nexter generation, like the Builder generation, they fully seem to know and embrace the value of doing for others. Almost intuitively they sense that there is great value and power in service. It is not just about having something provided for them, no, they are willing to help provide it for others. To say the least, this is exciting and long overdue! We have been a country of consumers for three generations and it appears that those values are being overturned as our eyes move from our own needs to the needs of the world around us.

Another characteristic of the Nexter generation is their quest of intimacy. Being raised in an electronic age where much of the communication and relationships are built online, the church is becoming key to providing face to face contact. This makes the church critical in providing intimacy and close personal

contact. This also seems to mean that churches like Southport, which have enough resources to support critical programming and outreach, are also small enough to provide a feeling of family that so many are craving. Mega-churches are beginning to decline because there is no way for these huge communities to provide that sense of whole family experience. We are entering a time when churches like us need to be ready for this generation when they show up at our doors, because if they find us, more than likely they will stay and help us become what we need to be.

In many ways it feels like the church is coming back to its roots. Jesus envisioned a world where people lived, not only for themselves, but for the whole community around them. For Jesus, there was no better proclamation of the Word than when people were serving others in the name of Christ. Jesus, and those who were the first generations of the church, fully understood that the power of Christ was best expressed when looking beyond your own needs to the needs of those around you. Story after story in the Bible speaks of the Spirit working in and through those who served. In fact our reading for today talks about service as the watershed between those who would be sheep and those who would be goats, those who would be in and those who would be out. A life without compassionate service, according to scripture, is an empty and wasted life.

A reminder of what it means to serve others came out in a powerful movie several years ago. It was called "Pay It Forward". We actually had a Capital Campaign at Southport that kind of used that theme. If you haven't seen it in awhile let me remind you of its message.

A 12-year-old schoolboy in Las Vegas, Nevada named Trevor McKinney is given a class project to complete by his social studies teacher Eugene **Simonet**, a man with terrible burn scars on his face and neck. His task is to come up with a plan that will change the world through direct action. On his way home from school later that day, Trevor notices a homeless man, Jerry and decides to make a difference in Jerry's life. Trevor then comes up with the plan to "pay it forward" by doing a good deed for three people who must in turn each do good deeds for three other people, creating a charitable pyramid scheme.

The rest of the movie traces the ongoing effects of the paying in forward movement which grows from this single school assignment to a worldwide movement.

One of the results of this movie is the establishing of the Pay in Forward movement that continues, in real life, the commitment to do for others in hopes that they will do the same.

This movement, and others like it, is rooted in the teachings of the one who lived a life of service. Jesus was constantly changing his world one person at a time, one life at a time, which in effect changed the world forever.

There is power in serving others. Whether the feeling you have deep in your gut that you have served a greater purpose in giving, or in just knowing that in changing one life the world can be a better place for us all.

