

Together for Good Sermon Series
Together We Serve
Mark 6:7-12
By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge November 8, 2020

This past week as I thought about Christian service, the topic of this final sermon in our Stewardship series, I heard the words of Jesus ringing in my mind. When the mother of his disciples James and John came to Jesus asking him to put her sons in positions of power and honor at his right and his left, Jesus reminded her that holding powerful positions was not what counts in his kingdom. “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,” he said before reminding them that he himself had come not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. That serving is more important than being served is one of those crazy upside down things that Jesus taught and exemplified that goes against normal human logic and instincts, but for those who would be his followers it is the way of life that he calls us to embrace.

Even though serving others can push us out of our comfort zones and sometimes it requires personal sacrifices, it isn't uncommon to hear people who practice serving talk about the personal benefits and blessings that they receive from giving to and serving others. In my last church we used to take teams down to work alongside families in Honduras on improvement projects in their villages, and I can't tell you how many times I heard people come back from that experience saying, “I got way more out of that than I gave.” Others who regularly serve whether it's in the community somewhere or in church often talk about how serving others improves their overall sense of happiness and satisfaction in life. It's as if Jesus knew what he was talking about when he turned our natural tendency toward self-service on its head! And of course, he did.

As that story about James and John indicates, it took some time for the disciples to understand and embrace what Jesus taught them about service to others. Like all of us, they needed to be taught to serve and they needed to practice doing it. One of the first times that we see Jesus giving them an opportunity to practice serving others is in our Scripture reading this morning. Up to this point the disciples were with Jesus, tagging along, listening, observing. They had seen him do some remarkable things for people - casting demons out, miraculous healings, calming a storm on the sea, but they hadn't really *done* anything up to this point. Then, when we get to Mark 6, Jesus gathers the 12 disciples around him and says, “ok,

it's your turn. Now I'm sending *you* to the poor, and the sick, and the oppressed and I want *you* to do for them what I have been doing for them." Let's listen to what he says in Mark 6:6-12.

7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

When you think of Scriptures about service, this may not be the first one that comes to mind. You may think of the story I mentioned at the beginning, or you might think of John 13 and the story of how Jesus washed his disciple's feet and told them to do the same for each other. If not one of these stories from the Gospels, you might think first of something that Paul says in his letters about how the Body of Christ works together and each member uses its gifts to support the other members. Those Scriptures do teach us about serving, and in particular, they teach us about how we ought to serve each other within the church, but this passage from Mark addresses our service to the world outside of our own church family.

Of course, both types of service are important. The ways that we serve each other in the church help us get that needed practice at being selfless and others-oriented, and our service in and to the church keeps it alive and healthy. Those things are important, but our service to each other inside of the church is only *one* of the ways in which we are called to serve. If we serve ourselves as a church but never get beyond ourselves to serving those outside who aren't yet part of our community, it's like getting suited up to go fight a fire but sitting around at home in your fire suit. You put the fire suit on for a reason. It's meant to be worn into the fire, and a healthy church body is meant to get outside of the walls of the church and be Christ's heart, and hands and feet to others. There is a quote by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer that speaks to this. He said, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It

must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.”

So, this is what Jesus was doing in our passage from Mark. He was sending his disciples out to serve and to do the work that he had come to do on his behalf. Now I imagine that the disciples might have felt a little nervous or doubtful in this moment. I can hear them saying, “Ok, we saw *you* cast demons out of people. We saw *you* bring a little girl back to life. You’re saying that’s what *we* are going to be doing?” They may have doubted whether they would really be able to help people in the way that Jesus had. Kind of like the way we might feel when we look around at the overwhelming needs in our communities, and the complex problems that don’t have easy solutions, and the deeply entrenched brokenness of different kinds that goes back for generations in families, and cities, and countries. We hear Jesus saying to us, “now *you* go out. I am sending you to get out there and help people. I am sending *you* to bring good news to the poor, and offer healing to the sick, and give hope to the oppressed. You be my presence and my heart, and my hands, and my feet to them. You serve them.”

When Jesus told the disciples that he was sending them to go beyond their safe little circle, he knew he was sending men who had fears and who sometimes lacked faith and understanding. He knew how taxing and exhausting it could be to do the kind of ministry that he had been doing, and he knew how needy the people he was sending them to serve were. Interestingly, he sent them out with nothing in terms of physical equipment for the task - no food, no extra money, or extra clothes. In addition to his own authority that would enable them to cast out demons and heal the sick, the *only* thing he sent them with was each other. He sent them out two by two, it says. He sent them to serve, and he sent them *together* to serve.

No explanation is given as to why Jesus might have sent them in twos, but I think we can make some pretty good guesses as to why he did. First of all, I expect that Jesus sent them with each other so that they could support and encourage each other. In Luke’s account of this sending, Jesus tells them that he is sending them out as sheep among wolves. I don’t know about you, but if I’m going to have to face the wolves, I’d rather have someone next to me to hold my hand!

Anytime you have to step out to do something difficult, or go into a situation that you’re unsure of, it’s awfully nice to have someone at your side, isn’t it? When my ex-husband and I divorced several years ago, we began to transition into a time-sharing schedule that was new for all of us. Naturally, I was concerned about the

girls at first who were 3 and 6 at the time, but I began to notice a bond forming between them as they went back and forth between their dad and myself. As long as they had each other each time they moved, they seemed to have strength and a sense of calm. I remember talking with them one night about how hard it must be to go back and forth, but I pointed out my observation. Even though you can't always be with mommy and you can't always be with daddy, you do always get to be with each other. The girls still have that bond, and they still like to be together when stepping out into unfamiliar places and experiences.

This is one of the reasons that serving others is something that we in the church do together. We need our friends at our side who can cheer us on, and encourage us to keep doing the hard work of loving and helping people. If and when those moments come when serving others in Jesus's name requires us to stand up to an injustice or to resist some type of evil, it's easier to do that when we are doing it together. Sometimes, serving others is just tiring and we may not feel like doing it or there may be those times when we want to retreat into our own worlds and not worry about other people's problems. In those times, our brothers and sisters spur us on and inspire us to put laziness or self-centeredness aside and stay committed to the work that Jesus calls us to do.

Serving together gives us strength, and I would guess Jesus knew that when he assigned partners, and a second reason that I would guess that Jesus sent them together to serve was because he knew that serving together could increase their impact. The author of Ecclesiastes refers to both the ways that two people help and support each other and to the ways that two people together accomplish more than one person can alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says,

Two are better than one,

because they have a good return for their labor:

¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls

and has no one to help them up.

¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. We can look back over the past and see lots of different examples of how Christians serving together have helped, and healed, and fed, and clothed, and brought good news in ways that had a significant impact because they did it together. Right here in Jacksonville, Lakewood was a part of a group of Christians working together to create a place that could support people in our community needing help with food and other resources. That effort was called UCOM and of course UCOM still exists in our community and members of this church still work together to support it's mission and to serve the people that Jesus has sent us. In August, members of Lakewood worked together with members of Lakewood UMC to collect for UCOM and *together* we collected over 3000 lbs. of food. (We have the opportunity to do that again this week) Tomorrow evening is the iCare Community Problems Assembly. One of the reasons that iCare has been able to affect real changes in our community is because it is a coalition of people of faith working together, and there is power in numbers.

These examples give us a clue as to why Jesus might have sent his disciples out together and why it is important for us to serve together. When we serve together we can do more.

The world that Jesus sends us to, really needs Jesus, and together we bring Jesus to the world. We can represent him individually as his light and life shine through us, but together we are the *body* of Christ bringing good news, hope, and healing to those who need it. I for one am glad that Jesus hasn't sent me on my own to love and serve others. Like my girls, I like knowing that I have friends at my side to help me and give me strength. We are truly blessed to have each other here at Lakewood. We are blessed to be part of this church family, and as members of this church family we all have a part to play. We all have received gifts from God which means we all have something that we can give to the Lord for his use among us.

This morning, in just a moment we will have the opportunity to bring our pledge cards forward and to say with our giving that we are grateful for the tremendous grace that we have received from God in Christ and that we are committed to being together and to working together at Lakewood to further God's kingdom. As we do this together, as you see your brothers and sisters making their commitments and as you make your own, know that we are together for good. Thanks be to God!