**Living Church: Service**

**1 Peter 4:9-11**

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One thing about a large church is that there is always a lot going on – it can be hard to keep track of it all! If you’re away from church for very long, you’re sure to miss something. For example, when I got back from summer vacation I learned that a group of children, youth, and adults in our congregation have been helping hungry kids this summer by making snacks for them. Did you know about that? It started because Chris Nelson, a member of our church, is an active volunteer and board member for Community Action Network, also known as CAN. Each summer, CAN holds six weeks of day camp for children in the Ann Arbor area who are living in poverty. At the camp, CAN serves 150 kids lunch and dinner with help from USDA and Michigan feeding programs. Unfortunately, there is not enough funding for the kids to get adequate healthy food to eat. For example, each child might get one piece of pizza as their meal. In brainstorming solutions for this, Chris came up with an idea - what if we, folks at our church, made healthy snacks - things like seven layer dip and veggie trays, fruit salads and banana muffins - for the kids to supplement their daily food?

Chris contacted the children’s ministry department, and together they organized a time during Vacation Bible Camp as well as each Sunday morning when volunteers could gather to assemble these snacks. Such a simple solution to a real need in our community – a solution born of one person’s passion for hungry children and a church that is ready to serve!

Over the last few weeks, we have been in the middle of a sermon series I’ve been calling *Living Church*. The premise is that we are living in a time when people really need what church offers – a different way of being in relationship to each other and the world. A way of compassion, love, and justice rather than competition, anger, and fear. But, it is dependent on us to live out what church can be in the world. We cannot sit complacently with our faith limited to an intellectual exercise or a passive set of beliefs. Rather, we are called to act out our faith through our presence, gifts, service, prayer, and witness.

Last week, I talked a bit about spiritual gifts – the inborn gifts we have to offer the church and the world – like leadership, compassion, discernment, teaching, and healing. Today, we’re going to explore service.

Much like we are living in a time when there is a great deal of need – poverty, oppression, injustice, and war – Jesus lived in such a time, too. Life in Judah under the rule of the Roman Empire was far from easy. Particularly for the poor. Both the temple and the government taxed people beyond what they could possibly pay. Individuals quickly became indebted. Women and children who didn’t have a man to intercede for them could easily starve. And there was always the risk of angering a Roman soldier and finding one’s self beaten, arrested, or even crucified.

Into this environment came Jesus who taught that everything we do, every interaction we have, begins with one thing – love. Love for neighbor – no matter who your neighbor may be. And love for God. How incredibly counter-cultural! And, for Jesus, love was not passive. Love was expressed through reaching out in concern and compassion for others – particularly the weakest, the poorest, the least of these. As Jesus says in Matthew 25, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Similarly, John Wesley started the movement called Methodism when, as an Anglican priest, he became aware of how passive the Church of England had become. Passive and exclusive. His hope was to reform the church through preaching two things – acts of piety and acts of mercy. For Wesley, if a person came to know God and to follow Jesus through acts of piety – prayer, worship, reading scripture, and so on – then acts of mercy were an inevitable result. We can’t help but serve others once we have come to understand who Jesus was and what he taught. Those are the roots of Wesley’s famous quote, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

Service to others is a natural and inevitable expression of our faith in the promise of God’s kingdom – a world community in which everyone has enough to eat, a safe place to live, respect from and for others, and hope for the future.

Yet, finding the place or the people we feel called to serve, finding the match for our passion isn’t always easy. There are so many needs in the world. So much work to be done. How do we choose where to put our time and resources?

Recently, I came across a phrase that I absolutely love. “Holy discontent”. Coined by Rev. Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Community Church, “holy discontent” is the feeling we have when we simply can't accept an injustice in the world and have to do something about it - when we simply have to act on a problem, injustice, or concern in the world. It is whatever keeps you up at night – nudging at your compassion, igniting your sense of right and wrong.

Holy discontent is what fueled the start of our CAN snack program, and we’ve seen it at work in many other ways in our own congregation, as well. Our welcoming statement is the product of holy discontent as is our Love Thy Neighbor program. Some years ago, a small group in our church became aware that homeless people in Ann Arbor don’t have access to meals on the weekends after the Saturday breakfast provided to them at St. Andrews. The idea of people going hungry concerned them – they couldn’t ignore it - and from that our Love Thy Neighbor program was born. Since 2008, people in our congregation have gathered on Friday evenings to make sack lunches for homeless folks and then on Saturday mornings to distribute those lunches, as well as the canned goods we collect each first Sunday of the month, at the St. Andrews breakfast.

Here is another example. A few years ago, Kristen Moore, another member of our congregation, was fed up by the all of the shootings that were taking place. As a parent and a Christ-follower, she was angry and frightened by so much gun violence. And so, she began a chapter of Moms Demand Action, which, though not a direct ministry of our church, continues to meet here and continues to grow. Holy discontent.

So, what is it that will not let you alone? What is the issue, concern, injustice in the world that you can’t stop thinking about? Perhaps it is racism or poverty, the exclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, or immigration. Whatever it is – it is your experience of holy discontent. And that means it is the work of God’s spirit nudging, pushing, pulling you into action, into service, for the sake of a better world. In my mind, there is no single thing we can do that more clearly demonstrates to the secular world that we as Christ-followers have something to offer than to act on our holy discontent.

I am grateful that this church has a long history of reaching outside its walls to serve in the community and the world. And that part of our history is to encourage our young people to do that, as well. Today, we’re going to hear from one of our youth, Emma Throm, who is going to share with you some thoughts about the relationship she experiences between faith and service.

To me, service is about putting my gifts into action and moving from being to doing. There are plenty of people who complain about our government and the issues that they believe in to their friends and on Facebook, but never actually do anything about it. But talking is not enough. On January 21st, I was scheduled to have a voice recital. To be completely honest, I’ve never liked recitals and I was not looking forward to it. This happened to be on the same day of the Ann Arbor Women’s March and the others around the world. I talked to my parents about my strong desire to participate in the march and skip the recital. And I’m really glad I did. Seeing so many people get together, wearing their pink hats and taking action, and hearing the speeches from many female leaders was very inspiring and motivating. This was my “call to action.” I wanted to get off Facebook and put my passions to work. At Skyline, my friends and I started a National Organization for Women chapter. In less than 4 months, we ourselves put on a conference titled “Future is Female.” We managed to get Michigan representatives Yousef Rabhi and Donna Lasinski, and Congresswoman Debbie Dingell to speak at our conference. Our chapter’s focus for next year will be women’s health in regards to abuse and relationships, as well as mental and reproductive health.

We are fortunate that our church is a place where action and service is encouraged--especially for youth. There are lots of opportunities for service throughout the year in youth group including a trip to Cass Community Center, a visit to the Chelsea Retirement Community, and projects for the Bryant Community Center. We also go on two mission trips each year: the junior high go to Zeba in the Upper Peninsula, and the senior high go outside the state. This year we went to Guatemala, where we helped build a school administrative building and worked with local school children. In youth group we don’t just talk about doing good deeds, we put our faith into action. The group’s commitment to service supports my own personal beliefs about involvement and helping others. This feeling of needing to take action against injustices that Nancy mentioned has become a big focus of mine, and will likely continue for me as a major in college.

I encourage everyone to put your gifts to use and take action for whatever you believe in.

Thank you, Emma. Friends, each of us is called to service – service in the name of bringing our world one step closer to fulfilling the Kingdom of God. We do this in many ways – some which we may find mundane but important, some which stem from our feeling of holy discontent. May we each listen to the spirit and find that issue we simply can’t walk away from – and then get to work! Amen.