

A MISSIONAL CHURCH EMPHASIZES SERVING NOT SITTING ROMANS 12:1; EPHESIANS 2:8-10

If your life doesn't have a purpose, it's not worth living. A 24 year old woman – a dancer by profession – jumped off a wharf in Biloxi, MS in an attempt to commit suicide. She had told people she was tired of living. A young man saw her jump and splash into the water. He stripped off his coat and leapt in after her in an immediate attempt to save a fellow human being. There was just one problem with his plan. He didn't know how to swim! Very quickly, he began to flail around in the water and was in serious danger of drowning himself. The young woman who was still in the water recognized his distress and began to paddle towards him. She grabbed a hold of him – gulping water and gasping for breath – and pulled him safely ashore. Instead of ending her own life, she saved the life of someone else! In that crucial moment when she saw her would be rescuer struggling for his life, her own life gained something it had lacked before: purpose. In that moment, she knew the difference between having nothing to live for and having something to live for. After pulling the young man to safety and getting him to the hospital, she was released with a whole new lease on life.

I want to talk to you about having a purpose to your life. I also want to talk to you about being a servant. The two go together. We're in the midst of a message series on what it means to be a missional church. What is a missional church? We've been saying that a missional church is biblical and effective. It's doing what Jesus said a church should do in Matthew 28:18-20: making disciples or devoted followers of Jesus. A missional church is primarily outwardly focused but it also takes care of its own.

I believe we took an important step towards being more missional as a church last Sunday when you approved a new constitution. I want to thank you for your support. It's my prayer and hope that, as a result, we will release more people to be involved in serving and hands on ministry. A missional church is about serving not sitting, about serving the Lord not just sitting in a pew. Serving in the church or serving outside of the church – it doesn't matter. We need more and more of both kinds of service. What does matter is seeing all of life and every aspect of life as an opportunity to serve the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

There are so many truths in the Bible about serving; I only have time to highlight three of them today. As we begin, let me point you to two scriptures that provide great insight into serving the Lord. Both were written by the apostle Paul to two different churches. You might know that another rendering of that phrase in Romans 12:1 – "... your spiritual act of worship" could be translated "your reasonable act of worship." That's fact no. 1 about serving.

SERVING THE LORD IS REASONABLE.

In other words, it just makes sense to serve the Lord. The more you know about God and know Him as a Person, the more it's simply reasonable to serve Him. You and I have to face a lot of cultural misconceptions about the Lord. For instance, many folk tend to think of God as Someone who lives far away somewhere and whose purpose is to meet our needs and makes us happy. They think of God as this Guy who runs this neat place called Heaven. You and I are encouraged to apply for help whenever we feel the need. We can go to the local branch office of Heaven (a local church) and ask the friendly clerk who works there (sometimes called the pastor) to fill out our order for God's help. Then we can wait for God to send His assistance to us according to our specifications. We most definitely live in a consumer oriented society that expects good service and instant gratification. Lots of us tend to approach God the same way because that's how we've been trained in our culture. What's God got to offer? How soon can I have it? Does He give good service?

Thinking differently about God and what it means to serve Him requires a transforming spiritual encounter. Some years ago now, Colonel James Irwin, a former astronaut who walked on the moon, spoke at a convention in Washington D.C. about the thrill of leaving planet Earth and seeing it shrink in size. He explained how in watching the Earth from his spacecraft, he felt so privileged to be a member of that crew and to see what so few would ever have the opportunity to see or experience. At that moment he was humbled by the awesome goodness of God. He said, "As I was returning to Earth, I realized that I was a servant not a celebrity. So I am here as God's servant on planet Earth to share what I have experienced that others might know the glory of God." I hope you and I don't have to orbit the Earth and walk on the moon to come to the same realization! The most reasonable fact in all the world is that you were put here to know and serve the Lord.

Jesus saw Himself as a servant. He said, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45 NLT) If you worship, admire, exalt and seek to follow a person whose entire life and ministry is characterized by serving, isn't it reasonable to conclude that your life will also take on that same quality? That assumption is underlined in the passage we read earlier: "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (Ephesians 2:8-10 NLT) Serving the Lord is just as much as part of the whole salvation experience as being on the receiving end of God's undeserved grace.

Those verses underline another reasonable aspect of serving. Every follower of Jesus is called to be a servant. If those verses imply that every follower of Jesus is saved by grace, then it's also reasonable to conclude that every follower of Jesus is saved to serve. In fact, it implies that God planned ways you were going

to serve Him long before you were either born or before you became a follower of Jesus. “He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (Ephesians 2:8-10 NLT) Let me share something I know after 30 years of ministry. When you know what God has called you to do – when you’re serving Him in the ways that He intended – you will possess a wonderful sense of joy and purpose. By the same token, if you never discover that place of service or you’re just unwilling to do what the Lord has called you to do; you will miss out on a profound sense of joy and fulfilled purpose.

You can choose to serve the Lord or not. You can also choose how you will serve Him – well or badly. Paul wrote these words to yet another church: “But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person’s work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss....” (1 Corinthians 3:13-15 NLT) The context is about serving and the message is clear enough. A day is coming when each of us will stand before the Lord and He will evaluate how well we served Him. So you need to ask yourself often, “Am I serving the Lord today? How am I serving the Lord? Am I serving the Lord well or badly?” Here’s another fact about serving the Lord.

SERVING THE LORD IS RESPONSIVE.

You can make serving God more mystical that it needs to be. Serving the Lord is pretty practical, down to earth stuff. How do you serve God? First, serving the Lord means serving the needs of the people God brings into your life. That can happen every time you walk into this church. I like to think of Karl Road Baptist Church as a laboratory where God’s people can discover different ways to serve Him by meeting the needs of others. You can serve the needs of those who come to a worship service – both long time members and first time guests. You can serve the needs of our kids and students. I’m increasingly sensing that God wants us to do a lot of serving outside the church, too. We’re going to find some ways to impact the Northland community in practical, down to earth ways. Additionally, you need to see the place you work, the place you live and the groups you’re a part of week in and week out as places where you can respond to the needs of people God has already put into your life. Serving the Lord is a lifestyle – a built in inclination to respond to a person’s need when God reveals it.

One afternoon in 1953, many reporters and government officials gathered at a railroad station in Chicago to wait for the arrival of the 1952 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He was a big man – 6’4” in height. When he stepped off the train, flashbulbs went off and many tried to shake his hand. He thanked them and then – looking over their heads – asked if he might be excused for a moment. He walked through this crowd gathered to meet him until he reached the side of an elderly woman who was having trouble trying to carry two large suitcases. He picked up her bags in his big hands and escorted the woman to a bus. Helping her aboard, he wished her a safe journey. He turned back to the crowd of people

who had come to greet him and said, "Sorry to have kept you waiting." The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary doctor, who gave his life in the name of Jesus for the poorest of the poor in Africa. One reporter said, "That was the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

So, how do you serve the Lord? Second, remember that there are numerous ways to serve the Lord. Don't ever limit it to being a pastor, or being a missionary or helping the poor in the inner city. Yes, all that is serving the Lord, but so also is much, much more. Richard Foster, a well known author of books on Christian spirituality, has written helpfully on what it means to serve the Lord. For instance, he mentions the service of small things – just helping folk with what seems like little stuff at the time: watching someone's kid... going to the store for someone... driving a person to the doctor... shoveling snow off a neighbor's sidewalk. How about the service of guarding someone's reputation? Refusing to gossip is an act of service unto the Lord. There's the service of common courtesy – a kind hello, a warm hug or handshake, a note of appreciation, a phone call or an e-mail to say thanks. You ask, "What does that kind of little stuff accomplish?" It makes others feel valued and appreciated. There's the service of hospitality. Some of you have the God-given ability to make others just feel welcome, cared about and relaxed in your presence.

There's the service of listening. You don't have to be a psychotherapist to listen. You don't have to be able to solve people's problems; just listen to them. One of the finest compliments I ever received was from a man old enough to be my father caught up in a severe mid-life crisis. After pouring out his heart to me, he reached over, gripped my arm and said, "Rick, you've got beautiful ears!" The funny thing was I hadn't said anything. I really didn't know what to say. So I just listened. Someone made this very wise observation, "Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God or his brother, but only for himself and his own follies."

There's the service of bearing the burdens of others. As a pastor, I know that you can just never have too many people in a church who know how to encourage others, cry with others, laugh and rejoice with others or struggle with others. My friend, if you're too busy to serve the Lord by responding to the needs of those God brings into your life; you're too busy for your own good. You're missing out on being a servant. You're missing out on the purpose of your life.

How do you serve the Lord? Third, remember that all genuine service has the same goal and the same result regardless of what it is: it brings glory to God. All serving says something wonderful about God either with your lips or with your life. We have some wonderful servants around Karl Road Baptist Church. May your tribe increase! I thank God for you and what you do: serving as a greeter or an usher... tutoring kids on a Tuesday night... building into the lives of other kids on Wednesday evenings or Sunday mornings... running the sound or projection equipment... maintaining the facility on Tuesday mornings or making

sure the place is secure at night... cooking a meal for one of our events... counting the offerings on Sundays... visiting our shut-ins... cooking a lunch for those who've lost a loved one. That's just a few examples of how people serve the Lord around here. Most of you will experience no change whatsoever in how you serve the Lord as we transition to a new organizational structure in January. Those of you who went to a monthly meeting of a committee or a board, we hope you will now be released to serve in other ways. Additionally, early next year we want to have a kind of a mass ministry team sign up experience where everyone will have the opportunity to begin serving in some way some place some where. We want to do everything possible to enable you to bring glory to God through serving Him. Here's a third fact about serving the Lord.

SERVING THE LORD IS REWARDING.

Is it OK to want or expect rewards for serving the Lord? Sure, it is! The idea of getting rewarded is all over the Bible. One Bible verse we looked at mentioned it specifically: "If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward." (1 Corinthians 13:14 NLT) No, God will never owe you a reward as some kind of obligation; nevertheless, He does enjoy rewarding His children for a job well done. If you're a parent, don't you enjoy rewarding your kids when they accomplish a task and do it well? If you're a boss, don't you enjoy rewarding people who work for you when they've done a good job? Why should God enjoy rewarding you any less for your faithful service to Him?

Why is serving the Lord rewarding? First of all, because it enriches your own life. God created you in such a way that you need to give yourself to something and Someone bigger than just yourself. At a recent conference I attended one of the speakers made a statement that was breathtakingly simple and true, "Christians don't grow until they begin serving." I bet you already knew that. So did I, but it was refreshing to hear it articulated again so clearly. There's no life more boring than the one that goes no further than just your interests and concerns. I mentioned Albert Schweitzer earlier. He turned his back on wealth and prestige when he sailed for Africa in 1923. His first hospital was an abandoned hen house. His first operating table was an old camp bed. On a trip to the US some years later, a reporter asked him, "Dr. Schweitzer, have you found happiness in Africa?" He gave a perceptive answer. "I have found a place for service, and that is enough happiness for anyone." Serving the Lord never takes away true personal happiness. It gives it!

Why is serving the Lord rewarding? Secondly, because it has eternal consequences no matter how insignificant it might look today. Our culture tends to admire the wrong people for the wrong things. We admire those who acquire wealth, power and luxury. We admire those who accomplish great things in the business world, on the athletic field or in the political arena. We admire those who create great organizations or works of art. What's the problem? All of those accomplishments are temporal and will pass away – every last one of them. But

whatever you do for Jesus and in His Name – no matter how insignificant it seems today – is eternal. Jesus Himself taught that principle, “And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.” (Matthew 10:42 NLT) The impact and influence of what you do for Jesus will never end. Again, hear what God’s Word says to you, “...And don’t hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort.” (1 Corinthians 15:58 MSG)

I love the old story of a missionary couple who’d been working in Africa for many years and were now returning to the United States to retire. This was before the days of Social Security. They had no pension. Their health was broken. Frankly, they felt defeated, discouraged and afraid. They discovered they were on the same ship as then President Teddy Roosevelt who was returning from one of his big game hunting expeditions in Africa. They watched with amazement all the fanfare and hoopla that accompanied the President’s entourage with all the passengers trying to catch a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship made its way across the ocean to the port of New York City, this missionary said to his wife, “Something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years and have no one care a thing about us? Here this man comes back after a hunting trip and everybody makes so much over him, but nobody cares two hoots about us.” His wife said, “Dear, you shouldn’t feel that way.” He said, “I can help it. It doesn’t seem right.”

When the ship docked in New York City, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor and other VIPs were there. The newspapers were full of the President’s arrival. No one noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap apartment on the East Side of the city, hoping the next day to see what they could do to make a living. That night the man’s spirit broke. He said to his wife, “I can’t take this. God is not treating us fairly.” His wife replied, “Why don’t you go into the bedroom, close the door and tell the Lord about it?” Sometime later he came out, but now his face was completely different. His wife asked, “What happened?” Her husband said, “The Lord settled it with me. I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But you’re not home yet!’”

There are rewards for serving the Lord, my friend, but not necessarily down here! Remember that when you get discouraged. Remember that when you feel unappreciated. Remember that when whatever you do for Jesus in this church or out in the community goes unnoticed. You’re not home yet. But when you do get home, there’s going to be a celebration beyond your wildest dreams. There will be rewards beyond what you can imagine. And best of all, Jesus will be there... looking into your face... and saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”