

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, August 8th & 9th, 2009
TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25; Luke 9:18-24
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

The message was preceded by a witness from the congregation. On Saturday evening, Hunter Stott spoke. On Sunday morning, William Andrews spoke. We also sang together the hymn and prayer "Day by Day," attributed to Bishop Richard Chichester.

Day by day...that's where the real action happens. It's out there, where we're living our daily lives, that the rubber hits the road; where we live our faith, and need a faith that works and matters.

It's good to hear from William this morning, because that's what he was talking about...being faithful, and being a servant, where he is as an almost sixteen year-old young man. Because that's the challenge we all have...being a servant and faithful disciple not somewhere else, but where we are...living it where we are.

There are 168 hours in the week. About fifty-six are spent sleeping. That leaves 112. Of those 112, about one is spent like this. The other 111 are out in the field...sometimes doing things we want to do, and sometimes doing things we have to do. Every once in a while doing things that are unusual, most of the time doing things that are pretty much routine...going shopping; and changing diapers; and coaching soccer; and taking the trash out; and so on. You know, I figure I spend about an hour a day in the car, and there's nothing more routine than that.

Most of those 111 hours is spent doing regular things in relationship with our two closest communities. The closest community—which we all have—is that of our friends and family. The second closest community—which some of us have—is that of our colleagues, and customers, and bosses, and employees at work. Both are communities in which how we treat one another really matters, and both are communities in which everyday living can have its moments. After all, there are times when family members and friends get on one another's last nerve as much as they love one another. And there are times when we just don't know what to do with the person who always messes up the office microwave but never cleans it up.

But those are the places we live our lives. It's among those communities that we live our 111 hours...seeking to be a spouse, or a parent, or a child the way Jesus would have us be. That's the real playing field of the Christian faith. That's where each of us fulfills our desire to be an every day Christian.

Where we find ourselves those 111 hours is our primary mission field. You see, there's a beautiful truth about the Christian life: God really is in charge, and God puts us where we are supposed to be right now; and puts us there for a purpose. It may not be where we are supposed to be tomorrow, and the purpose tomorrow may not be the same as it is today. It can all change. But where it is we find ourselves is where we are intended to be a disciple of Jesus today...taking care of kids, or responding to clients, or sitting with someone at the lunch table. Because it really matters. "Bloom where you are planted" isn't in the Bible. But it could be, because that's the way it works. May we be protected from ever despising the place in which we find ourselves, because that is the place where God intends us to be faithful servants. It's the first place God intends us to be faithful servants.

Now you know by now that our birthday is coming up, and we're celebrating it a bit differently than we have before. This year, we're asking something of one another...for a while, we're asking one another to be intentional about a life of serving the Richmond community. Us, Christ Church, in the best tradition of our birth, intentionally in sacrifice and service. Here's why:

First, because Jesus commands us to serve, and we want to be obedient. Jesus tells a story of sheep and goats in which we says, "when you served them, you served me." So we're the ones who step up to help for the love of Jesus just because he told us to, and just because when we're showing mercy to those less fortunate than us, we're really serving him.

Secondly, because though we can't pay God back for giving us life, we can pay it forward by serving others. It's a way to give thanks.

Third, because it's good to be uncomfortable every once in a while, and stretch a bit. Step outside our regular lives, or how we would normally behave, or how we would normally spend our time, with people we wouldn't normally be with...may very well make us uncomfortable. But we can't get around that Jesus does say "take up your cross daily, and follow me." And crosses are not comfortable. "Sit in your easy chair daily watching sport center and follow me..." That's comfortable. Crosses are not. They make our shoulders weary and put splinters in our fingers...both of which are signs that we're doing exactly what Jesus would have us do.

But there's another reason that really matters, and it has to do with how we live those 111 hours I was talking about a minute ago: It's so that we can be formed, and shaped, and molded so that we live those normal, routine, mundane, and sometimes even boring 111 hours we live every week with Jesus shaped hearts. So that in our closest communities, we live an every day faith that matters and in which the light of Christ shines.

You see, intentional service is a spiritual practice that makes a space for God to form us more fully as servants. It's a path of spiritual growth. Practice being a servant enough, and God re-shapes and re-forms our heart. We're brought along, so that instead of service being something we do, a servant is something we are.

Our character is what governs how we behave when no one is watching. It's what governs how we behave when we're not performing. And intentional service forms in our character the trait of servanthood. Our hearts are softened, and made pliable, and molded, and taught mercy; they take on a Jesus shape, and we become a little bit more like him...not just when we've signed up for something, but all 111 hours.

Because William can tell you, but we all know it--it's back in the day by days...in our households, or at school, or being with a friend...that the rubber really hits the road. That's where all of us live most of our lives; and it is where God has placed us, and asked us to let our light shine; it is where we get our best shot to live the servant's way of life among the people dearest to us for whom, maybe, it is most important that we have a servant's heart.

So if I'm not being very clear here, let me just say that the theme of this message is servanthood in everyday life, right where we are. So...how do we do it? Like everything else, it's going to be different for everybody, but here are a few things to consider...

First, we despise not the little things. It's the little things that can make the greatest difference, both for others and for the formation of our own hearts. I was talking with someone a while back who said that he had taken on a spiritual practice of inquiring about the wellness of every clerk who waited on him...at the 7-11, or the Target, or the grocery store. He would greet them, and say something like "I hope you're having a good day." And he would mean it. And he

told me, “sometimes they just blow me off, but sometimes it’s clear they’re really glad that someone asked.” Deuteronomy says that we are to teach our children. Well, they learn by watching the little things we do. When they see us living the life of service in daily life—in the way we speak to one another at the dinner table, or in the way we handle ourselves when they behave differently than we think they should, or even how we clean up after ourselves so that someone else doesn’t have to...it becomes part of their being.

Secondly, we keep our eyes open. There are scores of opportunities to show kindness, mercy, and service every day. Stay alert, and we’ll be amazed at the chances for servanthood. Let me tell you a story someone told me this week...this person had to work late one night, and on their way home her husband called and said “Don’t worry about dinner. I’ve made it. I’m warming it up right now for you.” Now, that’s a beautiful act of service, isn’t it? It’s a nice thing to do when your spouse is working late. Brings happiness. The interesting part of this story, however, was this person sharing that her act of service was to do the dishes afterwards. Her husband would do them. She didn’t have to. She was tired, and had good reason not to...but it only seemed right for her to do this small act of service for him. Neither of them woke up that morning knowing that this little portion of their life would arise, or how it would work out. It just happened, and they saw in it a place of opportunity. So we pay attention, and we live alert, because there will be an opportunity today.

And the third thing we do is stay connected to Jesus. We ask for help. You know, we never have to do it on our own. And my experience is that every time I stop and ask for help, I get it.

There are these things called “arrow prayers.” Someone else has called them postcard prayers. My hunch is that eventually, someone is going to call them Twitter prayers. I call them arrow prayers, and they’re good to have as part of our prayer arsenal.

Arrow prayers are short, momentary prayers that we just shoot up to God and that let God in. Little spaces that are created for God to enter in to what’s happening right now. “Jesus, help me do what’s next...” That’s an arrow prayer. “Be with me, Jesus...” That’s an arrow prayer. “Here I am, Lord, right in the middle of it...” That’s an arrow prayer, too.

We do some intentional connecting, whether by arrow prayer or something else, and here’s what happens...we see that no act of service at home or at school or at work is too little; we see more opportunities to live the servant’s way of life than we ever saw before; and lo and behold, Jesus shows up gives us what we need to do it...

So I hope you will help celebrate our birthday by signing up...right outside on your way out. Seems a good way to give back and give thanks. You’ll probably make a new friend, and you’ll feel better afterwards. At least for me, every time I do something on behalf of another I feel better.

But we’re all in different life circumstances. We’re all in different seasons. And if it doesn’t work for us to commit to something special right now, still may we remember that God has placed us in our homes, or at our work, or in our schools precisely for the purpose of being a servant right where we are. That is the mission field of the servant’s life.

Day by day. That’s where we get to live life the way Jesus invites us to. We’ll be done in a little bit, and there are 111 hours out there. May we experience God’s presence in every one of them, working on us, and forming us, and shaping us. And may it be we appreciate each one of them, and that in all the different places we find ourselves those 111 hours, we are exactly where God want us to be, and to serve.