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# “The Gift of Service”

Luke 4:16-30

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When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“The Spirit of God is upon me,  
who has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,  
who has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of God’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

They said, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

Jesus said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was

*cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”*

*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

*Luke 4:16-30*

Some days you just want to do what you want to do. You do not want to do anything anyone else wants you to do. You are frustrated by conflicts at work, family problems, stress over money. You are burned out. Nothing sounds good.

You still love your people, but you do not want to be around them. You do not want to talk. You do not want to hear anyone's opinion. You do not want to be asked why you have not done x, y, or z. You do not want to go anywhere you are supposed to go. You are in the mood to alienate people so that they will leave you alone.

You prepare your spot on the couch. You get a pillow and a blanket. You make sure you have the remote control—actually remote controls—within easy reach. You put a trash can near the couch so you can throw the packaging away without having to get up.

You have snacks—chips, popcorn, candy. You have taught your dog to fetch your beer. The primary aim when being a couch potato is to watch TV, but you also need your phone, iPad, or laptop. You will want to find out important information about what you are watching—IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes.

After four episodes you realize *Breaking Bad* is not funny. You start surfing. You give each show 10 seconds to grab your attention. You do not do anything that requires effort or thought.

For a while it is relaxing, but it is hard to know when to stop. Doritos do not give you energy. That night you do not sleep well. The next day, you feel tired.

The couch potato lifestyle is not a long-term strategy. Embracing apathy and selfishness is not the way to go. During COVID, multiple studies showed mental health worsens significantly when we are isolated.

Walter Rauschenbusch tells about a person who takes a walk in the woods one spring day. Birds are everywhere. They are singing. They are building nests. They are flying here and there. But he does not see them. He is a botanist, looking for plants.

Rauschenbusch then imagines a woman walking around New York, surrounded by people. But she does not see them, because she has learned to think only of herself. He says it is like someone reading the Bible with all those verses on caring for others, but not seeing the people they pass each day.

Growing numbers of United States citizens—most of whom claim to be Christians—want to deny the most basic benefits to those born in countries they view as less. The anti-immigrant movement is about the selfishness that keeps people from seeing those who need their help.

Most Americans favor low-income housing for the poor, but conservatives and liberals alike do not want that housing in their neighborhoods. They are afraid of losing their property's value, but study after study has found

that if low-income housing is maintained, those houses have zero effect on property values and can make a huge difference for the poor. Selfishness gets in the way of seeing the truth.

Debtors' prisons were abolished in 1833, but here is how it works now. You commit a crime. You go to jail. You serve your time. You are released. You are ready to move on and re-enter society.

But while you were in jail, you lost your job. Your bills piled up. You got behind on your rent. Your landlord evicted you. You try to get a job, but because you have a record, it is difficult to find steady work at a livable wage.

You start getting notices that you owe money to the court: fees from your weekly required drug tests, fees attached to your court appearances, administrative costs you are being charged to pay for your probation. Since you are barely making ends meet, you cannot pay those bills. You start getting collection agencies calling you. You are stressed to the max, but you are trying, and you feel invisible (Rachel Nader). Our selfishness gets in the way of seeing those who need our help.

D. L. Mayfield's book *The Myth of the American Dream* begins with Jesus' sermon in Nazareth. Mayfield writes, "I started by asking questions: What is the opposite of poor? Of captivity, blindness, oppression?"

She was shocked to realize the answers were the defining values of her life, the stuff she was striving for: affluence, autonomy, safety, and power, the American dream.

Mayfield identifies what she calls "the kind of statistics that—if Jesus' first sermon is to be believed—keep God up at night"—banks foreclose on as many as 10,000 homes a

day in the U.S., nearly half of American children will rely on food stamps at some point, and nearly half of Americans are categorized as poor or low income.

Mayfield adds, “It is far less likely that a poor American will rise from poverty to riches than a poor Canadian, German, or French person. Even China has surpassed the United States in terms of sheer numbers of people rising out of poverty in their lifetime.”

The American dream is a nightmare for many, but those who are hurting the most are the most invisible.

Prior to the time of Jesus, the Jewish people viewed poverty as a temporary category, a place into which a person could slip. The teachings of the Hebrew Bible ensured that those with means would help them get back on their feet. By the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire made poverty a permanent state, except for citizens of the empire.

A huge crowd shows up to hear Jesus. He has been in the desert for 40 days of hunger and loneliness. Jesus reads the lines from Isaiah that refer to what sound like four different groups—the poor, captives, blind, and oppressed—but they are all held down by the selfishness of the empire.

Luke wrote this story fifty years after Jesus. Luke is not writing history—what happened on this Sabbath in this synagogue—so much as he is writing about who Jesus invites us to be. Jesus’ first sermon is his mission statement.

He announces, “This is the day God wants all of this to happen.”

An old man shouts, “Amen.”

His wife whispers, “Jesus has such a nice voice.”



The neighbors are proud of Jesus. The reasonable thing for Jesus to do is tell them what they want to hear. He should talk about what it meant to the people to whom Isaiah preached 500 years earlier. He should politely encourage them to be nice to each other. If he preaches that sermon, everything will be fine. At lunch, they will talk about what a good preacher Jesus is, but Jesus refuses to preach a feel-good sermon.

Instead, he tells them to get off the couch. Jesus understands that they do not believe the words in Isaiah. They assume they are the center of the universe: “Let me tell you something, no prophet is welcome in the prophet’s hometown.”

Jesus refers to prophets who seemed to care as much for Gentiles as for Jews: “When Elijah was in trouble, he didn’t go to one of your widows, but to a foreigner—someone you would never invite to dinner, and she cared for him.”

The sanctuary gets quiet.

“There were a lot of sick people during Elisha’s time. Some of them lived around here. But Elisha didn’t heal any of them—only an outsider who wouldn’t be welcome in this synagogue. You can’t ignore the needs of the world and think God is pleased with you.”

Jesus is a citizen of Israel pointing out the humanity of their Palestinian neighbors. Jesus says they should care about people they do not want to care about. The congregation blows a gasket. When they finish the postlude, they try to throw him off a cliff. They do not kill him this time, but three years later, they do.

The story could have had a different ending. Imagine that the people who went to worship that day decided to

care for the people they have never cared for.

They could have said, “Let’s do it. Jesus preached, ‘Good news to the poor.’ We can push for a country that distributes wealth more equitably and for everyone to have actual opportunities. Jesus preached, ‘Release to the captives.’ At the very least we could be advocates for a system that treats people like human beings. “Jesus preached, ‘Sight to the blind.’ Health care should be a right that’s not reserved for the wealthy. Jesus preached, ‘Freedom to the oppressed’—we need to stop human trafficking.”

The people of Nazareth could have cared for the burdened and battered. If they had done it, they would have discovered something amazing. What Jesus is preaching is better for all of us.

Carolyn Schwartz is a research professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. She did not start out looking at the value of helping others. She wanted to see if receiving supportive phone calls from fellow sufferers of multiple sclerosis would benefit those with the disease. She found a trend that surprised her. While those receiving support gained some mild benefit, the real beneficiaries were those caring for them. Those who offered support experienced dramatic improvements in their quality of life—several times more than those they were helping.

Schwartz then looked at more than 2,000 Presbyterian churchgoers. She found that those who helped others were significantly happier and less depressed than those who did not.

There are physiological health benefits from serving.



People who volunteer four hours a week are 40 percent less likely to develop heart disease. People suffering from chronic pain experience decreased pain when they care for others suffering from chronic pain.

Being helpful is not a cure for clinical depression and some are overburdened caregivers, but for most of us, helping others brings better health. When we serve others, it promotes changes in the brain that are linked with happiness and self-esteem. Doing good gives us a sense of belonging, new friends, and connection with our community. Doing good helps us keep things in perspective and increases our level of optimism. Doing good helps us have a more positive outlook about own circumstances.

According to studies of MRIs, serving others activates the same parts of the brain that are stimulated by food and sex. Serving is a hardwired pleasure. Caring is a path to personal growth and genuine happiness.

Robert McAfee Brown said, “Even if we are powerless to do something about the wrong, we should at least be on record as to where we stand.”

We can be the people who stand on the right side. We can be the people we admire. We can be like the widow who volunteers with the Doula program. Once a week she sits with someone who is lonely and dying. She listens. We can be like the teacher who has a demanding job, but who signed up for the meal train. He knows that when you are grieving, someone bringing food is such a gift. We can be like the broker who reaches out to seniors, offering free financial advice over a cup of coffee. We can be like the lawyer who works long days, but comes to Plymouth on Tuesday nights to help migrants fill out the paper work that will help them to a better life.

We can be the ones who grace the lives of others by sharing our time—teaching, praying, encouraging. We can be the ones who visit the sick, read to children, and take those who feel left out to lunch. We can be the ones who look around and ask who might need a good word or a kind deed.

In sharing love with others, we will discover love for ourselves. We learn that while apathy imprisons, love liberates; apathy paralyzes, love empowers; apathy disheartens, love encourages.

For centuries, the greatest thinkers have said that we will find happiness in helping others.

Saint Francis of Assisi, “For it is in giving that we receive.”

Leo Tolstoy, “The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity.”

Winston Churchill, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

So, check on someone who is going through a tough time. Have a conversation with a colleague with whom you do not normally talk. Say thank you to someone who has helped you. Praise someone for something they have done well.

Look for a Plymouth ministry that has your name on it. The Congregational Care Team looks out for those who might be overlooked. The Underground Thrift Store shares what we have to benefit trafficking victims. The Racial Justice Ministry acts on God’s call to be a family. Little Flowers gives us a chance to throw parties for foster children. The Hope Program helps people find a job. Plymouth people share zoom calls with prisoners, share

food with migrants, and share flowers with seniors.

The Chinese have a saying: “If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.”

*sermon © Brett Younger*