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“You Gotta Serve Somebody”

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Jeremiah 1:1-10
Philippians 2:1-4

A Sunday school teacher was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan, in which a man was beaten, robbed and left for dead. She described the situation in vivid detail so her students would feel the drama. Then she asked the class, "If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and beaten up and bleeding, what would you do?" A thoughtful little girl finally broke the hushed silence by saying : "I think I'd throw up." Which is a little bit like the reaction Jeremiah had when God called him to service for others.

Jeremiah, who lived during the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE, was one of the four major Jewish prophets of the Old Testament. Jeremiah was of priestly descent, his father being Hilkiyah, and he lived in Anathoth, about three miles from Jerusalem. God calls Jeremiah and he realizes that he is looking at a lifetime call and it scares him to death. I'm no prophet, he says. I'm not the volunteer you want to go "to the nations." I don't want to stand before kingdoms "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" No, no, not me. Get somebody else.

Jeremiah has excuses. "I am but a child."

God says, "Don't say you're a child."

Jeremiah says, "I do not know how to speak."

God says, "I will put my words in your mouth."

Jeremiah says, "I am afraid."

God says, "Do not be afraid."

Jeremiah says, "They'll chew me up and spit me out."

God says, "I am with you and I will rescue you."

Jeremiah finally gives in and agrees to let God use him.

Most of us at some point have made similar excuses. I cannot do that, I do not have the time, energy, money, interest. Yet, interestingly enough, in these terrible economic times, more and more people are saying yes to service, answering the call to enter worlds beyond their own.

James is 13 years old and lives in New York City. His family has gone through some very hard times. His father lost his job as a butcher when the owner of the shop suddenly died. They were evicted from their apartment. His parents split up, and James and his brother have lived with their mother in two different shelters. But James is one of the lucky ones. He has a friend, a mentor, who's been with him

for six years now. Her name is Sara Mosley, and she simply calls herself a "volunteer." She taught in the New York City public schools for years and since then has volunteered as a mentor to some of her former students. At times, the group has been as large as 12 kids, a few Dominicans, the rest black. She's 36, and white. She's introduced these kids to chopsticks, Avery Fisher Hall, the Staten Island Ferry, Organic food and Duke Ellington. Sara felt called to give back, not only because she has so much, but because serving these kids enriches her life in immeasurable ways. She said, "You need to serve somebody to discover the true reason for your existence."

Sara is not alone. A new report released last month by the Corporation for National and Community Service finds that even during a time of prolonged economic recession, serving and volunteering has remained steady in this country, fueled by a compassion boom led by young adults and a wave of do-it-yourself volunteers working with their neighbors to fix problems.

The most comprehensive data ever assembled on volunteer trends and demographics; found that a total of 61.8 million Americans volunteered in 2008, up one million from the previous year. America's volunteers dedicated more than 8 billion hours of service in 2008, worth an estimated \$162 billion.

This report suggests that Americans are responding to the hardship around them by reaching out in service to others, giving their time when they cannot give their money. The fact the volunteering held steady during a time of economic uncertainty, high unemployment and foreclosure rates, does indeed speak to the generosity of the American spirit, but also speaks to the deep human desire to find personal gratification through service to others.

This trend has been a huge relief to non profit agencies such as churches. In recent years all non profits have seen ever increasing demands, at a time of dwindling resources, and we are all feeling the stress. Our own church has seen ever increasing needs from more and more people, and our Jeffco Action Center has seen exponential growth in the number of clients seeking their services. The United Way, the Salvation Army, Meals on Wheels and Catholic Charities report that they cannot keep up with the number of requests. So the fact that so many people are willing to serve and volunteer is a most welcome trend. You would assume that volunteering would drop during an economic downturn, because volunteer rates are highest among job-holders and homeowners. But this is not the case. The report found a huge increase in volunteering by young adults (age 16-24). This strong service ethic among the millennial generation includes a 217% increase in applications to AmeriCorps over the past 8 months.

Interestingly enough, for the fourth year in a row, Utah was the top volunteer state with a volunteer rate 43.5%, followed by Nebraska (38.9%), Minnesota (38.4%), Alaska (38%), and Iowa (37.1%).

Minneapolis-St. Paul once again ranked number one among large cities at 38.4%, followed by Portland, OR (36.7%), Salt Lake City, UT (36.5%), Seattle, WA (34.3%), and Kansas City, MO (33.4%).

In volunteering in mid-sized cities, Provo, Utah, again led the nation with a whopping 62.9 percent volunteer rate, followed by Iowa City (42.9%), Ogden, UT (43.6%), Madison, WI (41.5%), and Topeka, KS (40.7%).

And finally (and I loved this fact) working mothers have the highest volunteer rates of all.

Of course, many people volunteer for religious reasons. This is why the volunteer rates are so consistently high in Utah. Most religions ask their followers to give back out of gratitude for their God given blessings and leave this world better than they found it. This is important, because this links our service to others to God's action in and through us. It allows God to bless others through us, and unites us with something bigger than ourselves..

The fact is that this church literally could not function without our wonderful volunteers. Cover of bulletins lists just some of the things people do around here, and there are so many others, not listed. One example is the hallway renovations, people have been working on for the past week to help us be more welcoming this

Fall. We never could have done this without the hard work of our dedicated volunteers. The letter to the Philippians that Greta read for us speaks about what motivates us to serve in this way. “If you have gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if you have a heart, if you care, then love each other, put yourself aside, and help others. Forget yourself long enough to lend a helping hand.” That says it all. If you have gotten anything at all out of following Christ, then serve and give and share. And the good news is that the members and friends of the Lakewood Untied Methodist Church understand this. You understand this, because that is exactly what you do. Let’s watch.... Video of Volunteers...

In my experience, serving others always blesses you, and not only with a sense of satisfaction and peace of mind. No act of kindness goes unnoticed by God or unrewarded by God. There is a law in the universe that I have observed time and time again that you do get back exactly what you give to this world. Generosity, service, sacrifice, compassion are always rewarded in the end.

You know I have been on many long and short term Mission trips in my life in the UMC, both as a youth, young adult, and Pastor. They have all blessed me and helped me to put my faith into action and do more than just preach about it. But I really had reservations about the trip we took in April, 2007 to Guatemala. I was nervous about the political situation and the increasing power of the drug cartels, and had read about some random murders and kidnapings. Then I spoke to a woman who went on a Mission Trip to Guatemala and got violently ill, almost fatally ill. So I had serious reservations about that trip, and it would have been really easy for me to find some excuse not to go. But something told me I needed to go, and I did go, and it was the best Mission Trip ever. To this day I feel so close to everyone who participated, and the beautiful people of Guatemala will forever hold a special place in my heart. You gotta serve somebody besides your own needs, desires, and even fears. Sometimes you have to jump out in faith.

In the end, Jeremiah said yes to God, because he knew he had to serve somebody besides himself. He became a prophet about 629 BCE, and continued to prophesy for 41 years, during which period Judah suffered heavy disasters, and Jerusalem was made a heap of ruins by the invasions of the Babylonians. He would write both the book of Jeremiah, and possibly Lamentations.

Jeremiah's preaching and writing during the Babylonian Captivity reminded people that unless they returned to the moral law and true worship of God as taught by Moses, Jerusalem would be destroyed and its people exiled. He said that worship in the temple meant nothing if people's hearts were not pure and free from idolatry, deception and selfishness. He basically said, "You gotta serve somebody, and it ought to be the God who created you and is worthy of your praise." By far his most unique contribution as a prophet was to predict that God would replace the Old Covenant with something new, and this Covenant would be for the whole world, not just the Israelites. That was a radical message for the time, and people hated him for it. They hated him so much that tradition says Jeremiah was violently put to death in Egypt, probably by crucifixion. But because he was willing to step out in faith and serve God, here we are thousands of years later remembering him.

I pray that we will continue to be a church full of people who find great satisfaction in service to others. Because the bottom line is that you gotta' serve somebody, and it might as well be God. For, "...if you have gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if you have a heart, if you care, then love each other, put yourself aside, and help others. Forget yourself long enough to lend a helping hand." May we continue to do that as we serve others and align our lives with the spirit of the living God.

Remain seated as we sing "Spirit of the Living God"