

Imagine a Church Sermon Series
#6 – Serves God Through Serving Others
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We finish our sermon series today take a closer evaluative look at our seven-year-old vision and mission statements. During these last five weeks, we've been asking questions like, "How well have we lived out these statements? Do they still fit who we are?" "Have we turned them from words on a page into real-life actions that help us grow in our call to be the body of Jesus Christ?" The world is a lot different now than when we first adopted these statements. Back then, no one looked at you funny when you coughed in public and "social distancing" was what chaperones monitored at middle school dances. The world has changed; do our statements still fit us?

I mentioned two weeks ago how there is a natural progression to the points of the mission statement. We bring people in by welcoming and accepting them; we grow them up by inviting their questions and encouraging them; we care for them through that process; and then we send them out to put into action what they have seen and learned here. Sending them out is the focus of our sermon today as we talk about the last part of the mission statement, that we connect people to God and each other by serving God through serving others.

The point of all of this is not to have a nifty mission statement we can print in our bulletin or hang on our office wall. The goal is transformation. We don't come to church to stay the same – or at least we shouldn't – so our vision and mission statements should give us a pathway for transforming ourselves from who we are to who God has called us to be, followers of Christ who live out the gospel of love and grace found in the Bible. This is not about making a strategic plan; it's about making disciples.

A great model we have for transformation are the many superheroes who inhabit our popular culture. Bruce Wayne transforms into Batman. Diana Queen transforms into Wonder Woman. I'm a big fan of Tony Stark, who, with a push of a button, can engage a super-technological suit of armor that turns him into Iron Man. I'm still waiting for the story of the mild-mannered man or woman who, when donning a specially designed robe, becomes Super Pastor! "Bless you!" "Bless you!"

The theme running through so many superhero stories is the ordinary person who changes into something extraordinary. That's what the church is called to do, with help of God to turn ordinary people into heroes of faith. We are called to leave this church a different person than when we came in, armed with the superpowers of God's love and grace. In other words, we are called to go out with a mission, to take what we've learned and experienced and share it. This is not a side-effect of being in church; it is the primary purpose for it. As Jesus says, we are called not to be served, but to serve, to give our lives for others.

This last part of our mission statement is incredibly important to our future as a church, because it is the one that calls us beyond ourselves out into the world. We can do the other four things and never leave this building. But the church doesn't exist for the church's sake. It exists for the sake of the world and is called to take what we learn and experience here out into the schools, shops, and neighborhoods around us. Every gift we're given is not meant for us to hold onto, but for us to share for the greater good of God's kingdom. If we keep our gifts to ourselves, hiding them away so that no one else will get them, hoarding them to make sure we have enough, we're perverting the reason we were given the gifts in the first place.

Our service is one of the ways we use our gifts, and it's one thing Crestwood does incredibly well. If there were any part of the mission statement we could go ahead and check off our list, it would be this one. "Serves God through serving others." Let's see: Serving the homeless? Check. Blessing box to feed those in need? Check. Buying Christmas gifts for underserved children? Check. Thousands of dollars given away each month, both locally and globally? Check. Building Habitat Houses, going on Mission Trips, opening our building free-of-charge to non-profit groups? Check, check, and check!

But our mission statement challenges us to go deeper. We can do so by asking the question, "Why do we serve?" It's easy for churches to get caught up serving others for reasons other than serving God. Let me explain that with an analogy. While we lived in Chicago, I came to have a deep, soul-level hatred of traffic. And I had a couple hours each day to cultivate that hatred, because that's how long my commute was. That's why I loved when they installed open-road toll plazas. When you came to a toll booth, if you had a nifty little device attached to your windshield, you could zoom right on through without stopping to pay the toll, allowing the government to take your money without you even realizing it. The convenience of technology! But if for some reason you didn't have that nifty little device, when you came to a toll plaza you had to take this little exit and sit in the line waiting to go through the toll booth, while all the people with the nifty little devices were zooming by and pointing their fingers at you and laughing.

I wonder if sometimes we don't look at serving others as detours in our lives. We'd much rather keep zooming ahead on our own path, but because we know it's the "Christian" thing to do, we take that little exit from our full-speed schedules and help someone else out. When we do that, the person we are serving is no longer a person in our eyes; they are simply a means to an end, a by-product in our desire to "do the right thing." So maybe we serve others because of because it makes us feel better. Or maybe we serve because it reflects well on us to do so. Or maybe we serve to check something off our spiritual to-do list. Why do we serve?

What does our mission statement say? "Serve God through serving others." We serve others, our mission statement says, as a way to be obedient to the call to serve God. Through Jesus Christ, God poured out love on us in the most extravagant, lavish way. It's like trying to pour the ocean into a coffee mug. When you have that much love given to you, you can't help but let it overflow in your life, and one of the ways we do that is to turn that love into action through our service to others.

What's important to note is the relationship in this statement between God and other people. We are called to serve each other, not out of pity, but out of compassion. The word "compassion" literally means "to suffer with." To have pity on someone is to look down on them from a position of power. To have compassion for someone is to look at them as equals, from a position of solidarity and kindness. We all are made in the image of God, and therefore when we serve someone else, no matter how destitute or unclean or different they are, we are serving God.

Thankfully, we're not called to do it perfectly. At a Habitat workday a few years ago, I was put in charge of placing stakes in the ground so we could rope off some newly cemented driveways. Rather than asking me to paint or measure and cut wood, those in charge were able to pick up on my incredible stake-placing gifts. So I set about my task with much diligence, placing the stakes at just the right depth and distance from each other. I mean, it was a work of art! Of course, what didn't realize was that the crew had already poured the concrete for the driveway next door, so as I was placing stakes for one driveway, I was leaving footprints in the wet cement of the neighboring one. I was not invited back to place more stakes the next year.

God does not call us to serve perfectly; God only calls us to serve. If God only used perfect people, nothing would ever get done at this church. We're all imperfect. But guess what? God still loves us and still wants to use us. A Bengali poet once wrote, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." When we give, when we care, when we serve, we do so with the joy of knowing God loves us and God is using us – us! – to make a difference for someone.

For me, the ultimate reason we are called to serve is that we live in a world that needs serving, a world that needs to see tangible reminders that God hasn't given up on us yet. The need around us is so overwhelming that it can paralyze us from doing anything. But every small act of service we do makes a difference far beyond our effort. We may not see the difference, but we trust God is working through us. It's important we remember that our service will have a positive impact far beyond our imagining. The church needs you to be a part of fulfilling our vision and mission. More importantly, the world needs you.

Our General Minister and President, Sharon Watkins, was at a World Council of Churches convention in Brazil. She was talking with Pastor Clement Mputu, Vice President of the Disciples of Christ in the Congo. She said he looked straight into her eyes and told her about the six million people who have died in the Congo war. Six million. "Doesn't anybody even care?" And then she said he stopped and waited for an answer.

There is a world out there that needs to know God is real. There are people out there who have given up hope that God cares about them. As Gandhi said, there are people who are so poor they only see God in a piece of bread. Do we have any bread to give? Do we have any hope to give? Our mission statement says we serve God through serving others. The world is waiting to see if those are just words on a page or if we really mean it. Are we willing to share our bread, to serve those who feel forgotten? They are watching us, and they are waiting for answer.