

Plastic Jesus sermon series  
Service: Volunteer of the Year  
Oct. 15, 2023  
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I've shared with you before about this business concept I want to pitch on "Shark Tank," but I think its time has come. In this era when we can pay anyone to do anything for us, this is a sure-fire winner and I'm looking for investors. Do you get out of your car when you get your oil changed? Or when you pick up your groceries? Then why get out when you get gas? At my revolutionary new gas station, when you pull up to the pump, instead of getting out of your car, a person comes from inside the gas station, asks you how much gas you want, and – get this! – pumps your gas for you. These folks will attend to your every need; I think I'll call them "attendants." Not only will they pump your gas, but they'll also wash your windshield and even check your oil if you want, all while you wait inside the comfort of your vehicle. Isn't that a novel concept? Who's in?

Once upon a time, all gas stations operated that way. I can still remember pulling into gas stations in my hometown and choosing between the two islands: full-service and self-service. When's the last time you saw a full-service gas station? Nowadays, *everything* is self-service. You can literally go through an entire day and never have to encounter another person. We're in the middle of our "Plastic Jesus" sermon series, in which we're looking at how the values of spiritual suburbia – comfort, convenience, productivity – clash with the kind of followers Christ calls us to be. He says in the gospels that he didn't come to be served but to serve. And yet, is there a more appropriate descriptor of spiritual suburbia than the concept of "self-service"?

When held up to the biblical understanding of how we are to relate to each other, the concept of self-service is an oxymoron. In the Bible, "to serve" automatically implies an outward orientation toward another person. That's a challenge in spiritual suburbia, where all of our service tends to benefit us, even when it appears to be oriented to someone else. You could argue that much of the service we engage in today, even when we're serving someone else, is susceptible to becoming self-service.

Here's an example. My last church used to have something called the Cross-Eyed Owl award, which could have easily won the award for World's Ugliest Award. This award was given each year to a person in the congregation who had gone above and beyond the call of duty in serving the church. Each year someone was singled out for their contribution to the church and awarded the Cross-Eyed Owl statue, which I'm sure was prominently displayed in their coat closet.

Now, I'm not saying that Cross-Eyed Owl winners *only* served for the award, just as none of us serve others *only* so we can check something off our get-into-Heaven to-do list. But I wonder how all the other people felt about their service when another person was singled out? Should we have given our Cross-Eyed Owl Participation Trophies? In spiritual suburbia, where making a name for yourself and image management are valued as worthwhile pursuits, we have to be vigilant in guarding against the desire to be recognized for what we do, especially when it's in service to someone else.

I'll admit I'm guilty of this. If I'm going out of my way to serve, I want to be noticed for it. On our mission trip this summer to Costa Rica, one of my jobs was to take wheelbarrows full of gravel down a hill so we could make concrete. And I found myself timing my trips so that other people could see how hard I was working. At one point, our

guide said to me, “Wow! You work really hard for a pastor.” And I was like, “Aw, thank you...wait, what?” I’m still not sure how to take that, but it felt good to be noticed.

Why do we serve? Many of us would answer that by saying it’s out of desire to make a difference. That’s one of the main reasons why I got into ministry. Is there anything wrong with that? We all want to feel like our lives mean something. We want to live a life of significance. That’s human nature. But the potential trap is that if we are serving in order to feel significant, then we are engaging in self-service, and the people being helped are just a means to the end of our own self-fulfillment.

In his book “Death by Suburb,” David Goetz tells about how he volunteered for a ministry program that helped inmates transition back into the world after their incarceration. He was paired with a prisoner named Pete, who was approaching his parole. Goetz poured hours into his relationship with Pete, working with him to help smooth the difficult transition from prison to a local halfway house. Goetz said he had big dreams for Pete that included Pete marrying his girlfriend, buying a house, and settling down in the suburbs.

So, imagine Goetz’s anger when he found out that Pete had been arrested again after only a few months out of jail. Goetz said he was furious, because Pete had jeopardized all of Goetz’s plans for him. Goetz was using Pete in his pursuit of significance. He wanted to help a poor person become a suburbanite just like him. Forget that maybe that’s not what Pete wanted or needed.

It’s a fine line, right? We talked about this on our Costa Rica trip. We wanted to post pictures and tell stories about our trip, but we didn’t want it to come across as bragging or, “Hey, look at me selflessly giving up my valuable time to go on a mission trip.” And yet, if we didn’t post the pictures and tell the stories, were we shirking our responsibility to witness to Christ’s work in the world? Getting to the root of why we serve isn’t always easy, and I think that’s the way it should be. We should always question who our service is benefiting. Am I doing this for me, or for the person being helped? My guess is the answer often lies somewhere in the middle.

In a culture that values productivity, where we can run into trouble is when our service doesn’t produce the results we wanted, like Goetz found out with Pete. There are people who need friends, who need money, who need a listening ear or a chunk of our time because they are in such deep poverty or despair. But why get involved in that if there’s no upside for us? If our service isn’t productive, how can we live a life of significance?

What can help us move beyond this desire for recognition is remembering our motivation, remembering why we are called to serve. The challenge for us in spiritual suburbia is to make the move from self-service to full-service, where our focus is on serving others, and then to God-service, where our reason for serving is not prominence or even significance. Goetz says, “Finding our purpose comes not from the results of service but the act of obedience. No matter what the call...inner freedom comes as I pursue truth, justice, and righteousness without needing to be seen as right or needing to see the results I want.” In other words, we serve because we have been served and are called to do the same. We serve, not to gain significance, but out of obedience.

Pastor David Shirey tells a story he heard about the building of the National Cathedral in Washington DC. One of the foremen on the construction crew noticed that a certain stonemason was spending a lot of time on one of the gargoyles that would adorn

the very top of the cathedral. Knowing they were falling behind schedule, the foreman said to the stonemason, “Why are you spending so much time on this gargoyle? Don’t you know that it’s going to be so high up that it won’t even be visible to the people below?” And the stonemason replied, “I’m not doing this for the people below.”

What we are called to do may benefit the people here below – the kids in Sunday School, the single moms being served by Step by Step, the folks in Eastern Kentucky recovering from flooding – but our ultimate motivation isn’t to do it for the people below – including ourselves – but in response to God’s gift of Jesus Christ and the call to share that gift. We might consider a ministry unsuccessful if it only helps a few people. But “success” in ministry is qualitative, not quantitative. Your service may only impact one person, but that may be exactly what God needed you to do.

In the scripture I read, Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” This week, find a way to serve that no one else knows about. Don’t post on social media. Don’t tell your friends. Just serve. Give up the relentless pursuit of significance and lean into simple obedience. Take action with no expectation of results. See a need a meet it. You make not make it on the evening news. No one will pat you on the back. You may not even get a “thank you” from the person you serve. But does that matter?

I heard someone say this week, “There’s only one set of eyes that I turn to for approval, and they’re not in your face.” No one else may see you serve, but God sees. In this culture where self-service is the rule, let’s live the exception, giving our time and energy and money to serve others, not to make ourselves feel better or assuage our guilt, but simply because God calls us to do so. From significance to obedience. We’re not doing this for the people below.