

Copyright November 11 & 12, 2017. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

Title: Habit Forming: Serve

Date: November 11 & 12, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [John 13:1-6, 14-17](#)

Text: [Matthew 20:20-28](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



We are in the last couple of weeks of a series of sermons on the habits that form successful spiritual people. Throughout the centuries, followers of Jesus have used these disciplines "...to train for Godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7b), to form behaviors and habits that slowly, surely transform them from the inside out so the eventually they

become like Jesus.

Whether we like to admit it or not, "We are," as William James the 19th century philosopher said, "a mere bundle of habits." He wasn't even close to the first to make this observation. Aristotle, four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, wrote extensively about them connecting the moral life with the virtue of habits. "The behaviors that occur unthinkingly are the evidence of our truest selves," he said. "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act but a habit

Hundreds of habits influence our days—they guide how we get dressed in the morning, talk to our kids, and fall asleep at night; they impact what we eat for lunch, how we do business, and whether we exercise or have a drink after work. There were a great variety of habits in play to get you to worship today, even if it isn't your habit to attend weekly.

Researchers know that each habit has a different cue and offers a unique reward. Some are simple and others are complex, drawing upon emotional triggers and offering subtle neurochemical prizes. But every habit, no matter its complexity, is malleable. The most addicted alcoholics can become sober. The most dysfunctional relationships can be transformed. Every habit can be modified but you have to decide to change. You must consciously accept the hard work to change a habit.¹ The spiritual disciplines or practices are designed to do just that.

We've talked about the spiritual habits of study, prayer, and giving, spiritual practices of engagement. They are things you do. Last week, we looked at practices of sacrifice, the habits of giving things up to discover an instrumental view of who you are in relationship to who Jesus wants you to be. Things like abstinence and fasting, martyrdom....no one raised their hand wanting to embrace that discipline...and secrecy, foregoing recognition for your good deeds and generosity. This week, we return to a practice of engagement, doing something to become more like Jesus. In a way, it is a keystone discipline. No practice is more reflective of the life of Jesus than the discipline of service because, Jesus said, "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Matthew 20: 28)

If you walk your way through the gospels, over and over again you see snapshots of Jesus living out this call to serve, not to be served. He begins his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth reading from the prophet Isaiah about being the servant of Yahweh. He was sent to care for the poor and oppressed, the imprisoned and the blind. Jesus demonstrates this commitment by long hours caring for those who sought him out for healing. He teaches all day long and then feeds 5000 even though he began the day exhausted and spent.

He models a servant life style and then, teaches it repeatedly. He tells his disciples. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) He says, "Whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25) He puts a child in their midst and asks, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Then answers, "Whoever becomes humble like child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:4-5) When the disciples express concerned about the cost and sacrifice of following, he teaches that "the first will be last and the last will be first." (Matthew 19:30).

Despite years of modeling and teaching, the disciples still argue about who is greatest. In what must be the first recorded reference of a helicopter mom, long before helicopters were ever invented, Salome, the mother of James and John, approaches Jesus. It is just a day or two before his entry into Jerusalem. Jesus knows something is up as the women kneels before him. She asks a favor. She wants her sons to sit next to Jesus, one to the right and one to the left, when Jesus begins to reign in his kingdom. She is confused about when and where the kingdom is and likely are her sons, who have clearly put her up to this. She is doing their bidding and Jesus knows it.

He looks at James and John and says, "You think you are up for this? Do you think can follow in my footsteps, drink my cup?" "Absolutely, we are

able" they say. I bet Jesus shook his head. After three years of teaching and demonstrating a servant lifestyle, they still don't get it. The other 10 disciples are angry, not because of their confusion but because they too wanted those seats. Jesus says, "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

This story may be the very reason that a week later, when they were at the Passover meal, Jesus realizes he needs to teach one more lesson about serving. Clearly, they didn't get the lesson a week ago because at that very table, the table that Jesus transforms into our most holy meal, a dispute broke out among them about who was the greatest. So, Jesus rises, takes off his outer garments, finds a towel and basin of water and begins to wash their feet. They let him do it. Only Peter protests but Jesus insists. When all have been washed, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ...If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. (John 13:12, 4-15)

The next day, Jesus would die on a cross and now 2000 years later, that cross is the symbol for following Jesus. We wear it around our necks as jewelry and put it on buildings as art pieces, saying to the world that this is what it means to be Christian. But somehow, I think if Jesus had a say in what the symbol for following him should be, it would not be a cross. It would be a towel and basin.

"I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you." What are you doing? What does it look like? Where is it lived out?

It starts in community, here in this place, in the Body of Christ, where together we come to serve one another even as we are inspired by God's Word and presence. The first step of the habit of serving is the habit of worship, of being together in community. That in itself is a challenge for many of us and we aren't the first to experience this challenge. The Book of Hebrews reveals that the first church in the first decade of its life experience this very challenge. The author writes a challenge about serving. "...let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds..." That's a challenge to serve and in fact, sometimes when you are asked too many times, you can feel provoked. But listens to what he adds, "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...." (Hebrews 10: 24-25) Do you hear what he is saying? Some have fallen out of the habit of worship and the end result is their spiritual life of service suffers.

Do you know getting off track is rarely an intentional decision? It usually happens little by little. We get busier and busier, so we skip a day here and there. Something comes up and you think, I'll go next week. Then, next week becomes next month and before you know it, you are neglecting the habit. It's the same way with service. No one says, "I think I'll stop doing things for God. I think I'll become a backslider." It just sort of happens. Our schedule gets filled up with other things, and service to the kingdom of God gets edged out. Pretty soon, if we're not careful, we find that we're not doing anything to benefit anyone other than ourselves. If we're not careful, our Christian life can become just about "me, me, me—my problems, my prayer list, my blessings," and on and on.

We like to think we were the first generation to experience it but clearly, the first century church experienced it too. It is why the author says to form the habit of serving you have to have the habit of meeting together, of coming into this community and encouraging one another. You are doing that today. It is one of the essential reasons for a worship habit, the first step in the habit of service.

Then, know where you are called to serve. Throughout the New Testament, there are different lists, acknowledging that we all have ways we can serve. Paul says that "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12: 4-5) Your talents, your abilities, your strengths weren't given for you to make money, build a good life, build a reputation and in general, feel good about yourself. They were given for "the common good," to encourage one another, to serve.

Another way to put it is this. Who you are is who God created you to be. And who God has created you to be reveals what God has given you to do. Parker Palmer puts it this way. "Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood...the seed of true self that was planted when you were born."² Or, Frederick Buechner says it this way. "...the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."³

That deep calling within us is the growing pains of transformation, the desire within each of us to be changed from the inside out, to look more and more like Jesus. The longing and ache is addressed as we form habits of service, whether it is teaching children, sponsoring youth, singing in the choir,

serving communion, bringing food for the Season of Giving, delivering baskets to the needy, caring for the sick, working on the property or inviting people to worship. All of these are the tradition jobs are getting things done but what they accomplish is the point of service. It is the just byproduct of service. The purpose of the habit of service is to help you become more like Jesus, to be a steward of the gifts and graces that God has giving you.

There is always a need; the list is always long. There are lots of opportunities to serve here locally and beyond, spots to be filled organizationally, needs to be met. But meeting a need requires forming a habit, a habit that ends up forming you.

On this Veterans Day weekend, when we remember those who have served in the military, I'm thinking today of the ending scene from Saving Private Ryan. I guess I need to say, spoiler alert because I am going to tell you the ending. But it's not like you haven't had time. It's been out for 20 years. It takes place at the Normandy Beach American Cemetery, a place that Ann and I had the privilege seeing this summer. It's truly a hallowed and sacred place. Matt Damon, who was Private Ryan is suddenly transformed from a young soldier to an old man, a sixty or seventy something WWII veteran standing in front of a white cross, the grave of Capt. John H. Miller, the man who looked all over the D-Day battlefields to find him. He kneels before the cross and the one who saved him. With tears in his eyes he says, "I hope I've earned what you've done for me." Then, as he rises, his wife comes to his side. He says to her, "Tell me I'm a good man; tell me I've lived a good life."

Want to live a good live, to be a good man, woman? Maybe even great? Serve because Jesus said: "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Matthew 20:26b, 28). Want to be great? If you do, I am convinced that when you serve, you start looking more like Jesus. Go ahead try, you'll find it is habit forming.

¹ The Power of Habit, Duhigg, page 110

² Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer, page 16 & 17.

³ *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Frederick Buechner, 118.