

Serve

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Matt 20²⁰⁻²⁸ / 2 Kings 5¹⁻¹⁴

Let's just recall for a moment where we began last week. I asked the question what actions or activities of ours have the greatest potential to influence those around for the Gospel. I began, then, to answer that question by examining the practice and the attitude of generosity. Generosity recalls God's grace to us, God's basic gift which is to keep on giving to us. Generosity always makes people ask the why question and the why me question and these re questions which put us in mind of God. Be generous even as Your Father in heaven is generous.

Today I want to examine another gracious action – an action which recalls grace and so recalls God even if God is never mentioned. And I want to start by looking at a little known biblical character.

Naaman was a man of substance. He was, as far as we can tell, a brilliant general – he had subdued all Israel from Damascus in the name of the King of Aram which is, interestingly enough, the predecessor of modern day Syria. The Aramean King, Ben Hadad II had engaged Naaman as his leading general and he had subdued the Northern Kingdom severely. The fascinating thing is that the scriptures insist that God had given this pagan King

and his pagan general victory – this was, according to the writer, God’s doing!

Naaman’s life, however, isn’t one of complete victory. On the outside it is. He was likely second only to the King. But that may as well have not counted for anything. You see somewhere along the line Naamaan had contracted Leprosy – perhaps the most feared disease of the Ancient Near East. Naaman was a leper and though he was still functional he knew that within a few years he may well be not only completely unable to bear the sword but in fact cast out of all human society because of his disease.

Let’s just pause there because it’s a wonderful illustration of how twisted out values can become. You see Naaman had, what we might call, **everything**! He had wealth, he had status, he had power, he had position, he had family, he had strength and yet, he may as well have had nothing because shortly none of it would count for anything. The fate of lepers was isolation and a loss of position and power and, eventually wealth.

Naaman was suddenly brought face to face with the emptiness of wealth possessions and power and we also need to remember that these things are very much secondary to what I would call primary values – things like, love, health, community and conscience. What are we valuing at present and what really can we not do without? What’s really important to us?

So here we have Naaman, incredibly powerful, wealthy, able. A loyal servant of his King. But his future is dark. Leprosy clouds everything and there is little he can do about it until... a small and incredibly vulnerable figure appears in the story. She is so powerless, so vulnerable that she is not even given a name. She is simply a servant.

This young woman is, apparently, of marriageable age though all thought of that may well have disappeared from her mind because this girl is a captive from one of the raids carried out across the border in Israel. She is a Jew. And she's been captured and brought to Naaman's house to serve his wife.

Now I want you to put yourself in her shoes. Dragged away at perhaps the age of 14 years from all she held dear. Perhaps she witnessed the death of her relative – her mother, her father, her siblings. She has now been transported to a foreign country where they speak a foreign language and they live in a foreign way and where she must serve a complete stranger – for life!

How would you feel? How would you feel towards those who'd captured you? Would you have any pity, any mercy, any good feeling at all? I doubt I would frankly. But this girl is different. She sees her master's need, she sees his terrible predicament and she offers all she has to him, she **serves him**. 15 simple words.

“If only you could visit the prophet who lives in Samaria – he could heal you.” She didn’t need to tell him this. She didn’t need to speak up. She could have watched him disappear into a pit of despair but she chose rather – to serve him – to serve the one who lay behind her capture – to serve the one who represented all that pain and suffering – to serve him because that is what her God would have her do.

That is all we hear of this servant girl. No name. Little past. No future and yet through this one act of incredible sacrificial service she changes the future for two nations. Naaman is healed through the prophet. He takes a new faith back to his country and worships faithfully there and likely introduces a number of people to it.

Israel meanwhile is kept safe from Aram during the rest of Ben Hadad’s reign and perhaps because Naaman resigned – who knows.

Service is perhaps the most humbling of actions. When we serve another we deliberately and obviously place ourselves below them and this is what Jesus insisted He was for as we heard this morning He said²⁸ “just as the Son of Man came not to be served but **to serve**, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

And we too are called to be precisely this for Jesus’ advice is that “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” Service on earth is greatness in heaven. Indeed, Jesus’

own assessment of who is rewarded by God is all about service. Who are they that are received with joy? They are those who, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned.

Why is service so important? Clearly one reason is that it is so influential. The greatest and most widely known Christian ministry in the last several hundred years – perhaps 1000 years is what? Yes, that of Mother Theresa whose main work was to feed and care for the desperately poor in India. This ministry, I would say, has done more to lend integrity to the message of the gospel than anything else in the last 1000 years – surely.

Secondly service to anyone, anywhere evokes God because it imitates the life of Christ. Jesus really only did two things in His ministry – he taught about God and he served people. Not many can teach. **Everyone can serve!**

John Bunyan the author of Pilgrim's Progress used to say this... **"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."** God wants us to really live – to really experience the joy of life and we won't do this by attending to ourselves. No programme of self-improvement will put us in touch with the essence of really living, which if we look at the life of Jesus has service at its heart. You can't diet your way to happiness; you can't train your way to joy; you can't earn your way to contentment and you can't twitter your way

to satisfaction. **Real contentment, real joy, real life comes by serving.**

Finally service is the key to community. We talk a lot about developing community here and to a certain extent we have but if I'm honest where community has really developed at Leith is where we've served each other or helped each other **to serve.** Where we've fed those who have been going through tough times. Where we've grieved with those who've lost loved ones; where we've helped families and parents with their children's spiritual development and, indeed with their own. You see service demands that we look at things from the **other's point of view.** Giving people what they don't need when they don't need it isn't service. We have to be aware of another's need to really serve that other.

Martin Luther King Jnr captured this beautifully when he said, **"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But...the Good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"**

You see how service starts by asking questions about the other. And when we do this we truly begin to be a community.

So let's summarise. Service is an incredibly effective witness. It has the power to influence so many people. It speaks of God because it imitates God and finally service is powerful because it

creates community. Nothing makes us see the world so effectively through the eyes of another like service.

How are we serving today? How are we giving without receiving today? How might we? If we're not serving, we're just not acting in accord with the faith we profess – we believe but we're not living it. So, how does God want you and I to serve this week. Perhaps it needs to begin in the home. Stop counting up all the things you do there and do something unexpected for once. Men, make the bed, do the ironing, hang the washing – do something your wife would never guess you'd do. At work, do the washing up – buy something nice for morning tea – be nice to the person who never is!

And perhaps God has something special for you to do. PSO would love more people to be involved in the Buddy programme which teams adults up with children who desperately need a balanced adult in their life occasionally. Perhaps you could collect for an agency or just offer some help to Orphans Aid in their shop? Service is witness – just do it!