

Availability

Intro:

- Today Mother Teresa is a household name all over the world. Nobel Prize winner. Icon of justice. Canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church.
- But for most of her life she was an entirely unknown nun from Albania, serving in a poor neighborhood with a small group of sisters ...
- Mother Teresa devoted her life to serving the suffering and dying in Calcutta, a poverty-stricken and forgotten slum ... where she founded a monastic order known as “The Sisters of Charity” who continue her work to this day, even after her death.
- A sign hangs above the door that leads from their humble convent onto the slum streets outside: There are no great things today, only small things done with great love
- A little sign that guided their founder’s hidden steps for decades, then ... and after 30 years in Calcutta, guided Mother Teresa’s words in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.
- “God loves us, and we have the opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love.” (Mother Teresa)

Frame:

- Service is one practice expressed four key ways:
 1. Love (aiming our formation outward toward others)
 2. Hiddenness (serving quietly in the ordinary environments of our life)
 3. Availability (being both intentional and interruptible)
 4. Kinship (turning strangers into family)
- And in this session, we look at at the two-sided coin of how we practice service: Becoming both *intentional* and *interruptible*.

Exegesis:

Turn: Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 22, where Jesus responds to a question from a highly educated Bible teacher about the most important biblical command.

- Jesus responds — verse 37 — “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:37-39)
- Jesus inseparably joins together our love for God and people, making service an essential practice for the formation of all his apprentices.
- In Luke’s account, though, the teacher of the Law presses for specificity: “And who is my neighbor?”
- In other words, “Who rabbi, am I responsible to serve?”
 - To whom will I give an account before God?
 - Who has God given me to love, practically, by the very love I’ve freely received?
- French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupery famously said: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”
- That’s how Jesus responded to the question.
- Not with a direct response but a story ... a story aimed at awakening vision, a deeper sort of longing than the self-rationalization this man sought. He paints a picture to awaken him (and us) to yearn for the vast and endless sea.

A picture known as “The Good Samaritan:”

- Walking the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, a notoriously dangerous route in Jesus’ day due to crime, a man gets mugged, left robbed and bleeding on the sidewalk ...
- A priest sees him but passes by on the other side of the street
- Next, a Levite (a particular type of priest) sees him but pretends not to ... passes by and gets along with his day
- There is growing psychological evidence that human beings are pre-wired to respond to one another’s suffering.
 - From birth, an infant who hears another infant crying or in distress will respond

automatically by their own cries. A baby, perfectly at peace, will impulsively share the distress of another.

- Which is why daycares and orphanages tend to be quiet together and loud together.
- As early as 14 months, a baby who hears the crying of another infant will attempt to intervene — doing something to alleviate another's suffering.
- Human beings are neurologically wired, at the level of primal instinct, to do something about the suffering of another.
- Meaning that to see a human being in distress and pass by (like the ailing stranger in Jesus' parable or the needy person in your city) is not merely evidence of a lack of spiritual formation ... *it's actually evidence of human de-formation* — the loss of true humanity, the diminishment of God's divine image within me to some degree.
- Next, a Samaritan, the ethnic "less-than's" of Israel, thought to be spiritually misguided (to put it politely).
- Most of Jesus' audience thought of Samaritans as half-breeds and heretics ...
- A Samaritan walks by.
- v33 — "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him." (Luke 10v33)
 - The English, "Pity" is the Greek, "*splanchnizomai*" and it's mostly translated "compassion." It's a feeling word, meaning, "from the gut."
- This Samaritan didn't "feel for this guy."
- He "felt for this guy" — a doubled over in his gut, can't walk by, just have to help — kind of feeling.
- And it's not a single stop.
- **He enters into his pain in the moment** (allowing himself to be interrupted).
- **He pays for his healing and rehabilitation slowly, over time, at his own expense** (compassionately co-suffering with him, shouldering this stranger's burden alongside him in a costly way).
- **And he returns to him** (remaining in relationship over time, meaning it's not a transactional moment but a kinship relationship of mutual love born from the interruption).

- “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10v36-37)
- The story began with a man asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”
- And Jesus flips the question back on that man, essentially asking, “Who made that stranger in need on the roadside into a neighbor?”

Seam:

- My uncle Bobby lived a humble life. Worked at a hospital in Nashville as a night shift custodian.
 - Diagnosed with leukemia in his early 40’s.
 - Died tragically young, at 43 ... leaving behind a wife and two daughters.
- The hospital, where he was loved, held a short gathering of remembrance for family and co-workers.
- As expected, it was modestly attended, just a few folks crowding into a small hospital room during the night shift ... to share stories and memories.
- A couple minutes later, a few obviously disheveled men, likely houseless, quietly entered the room, and stood against the back wall.
- People were sharing stories and memories about Bobby.
- A silence hung between stories, the way it does at gatherings like these ...
- Waiting for someone else to speak up.
- A raspy, kinda slurred-sounding voice broke the silence: “Every winter night,”
- It was one of those guys lining the back wall: “Every winter night, Bobby brought us blankets on his way to work at the hospital. In the morning, on his way home, he’d pick them up, have them laundered, and do it all over again the next night.”
- This group of men lived under one particular interstate overpass in downtown Nashville.
- Bobby got off at that exit to go to work.
- Noticed them there, trying to sleep in the cold under the covering.
 - Served them.

- Learned their names.
- Shared his life, and they shared theirs.
- Became their friends.
- He'd apparently been doing this for years. No one knew. Not even his wife.
- He'd done it in secret, not letting his left hand know what his right hand was doing.
- When that rough-around-the-edges stranger spoke up, the most tragic moment of Bobby's life was transformed into the most powerful. That makeshift memorial in a hospital room was as all-of-a-sudden as holy as any cathedral's ever been.
- All because he'd "seen a need and stopped ... making a stranger into a neighbor." And when we saw it, those few of us huddled in that hospital, it awoke a deep longing in every last one of us, something like a "yearning for the vast endlessness of the sea."
- For Jesus, spiritual formation was not merely a set of individualized practices, but the living embodiment of a social order lost in Eden and restored in Resurrection.
- So the question I should be asking is: Does my spiritual practice draw me toward the suffering and injured one on the roadside ... toward the tax collector and the sinner ... toward the strangers I might pass by without recognizing them as neighbors?
- Jesus' goal is not merely the formation of a redeemed individual but of a new community — a family, made up of every tribe, tongue, and nation ... from every walk of life, who are together being formed into people of love, justice, wisdom, and peace to one day rule over the whole earth at his side.
- Matthew 22 records Jesus telling that parable.
- If you were to turn back a page or two, in Matthew 20, you'd find Jesus living the themes of the very parable he'd later tell ...
- Jesus on his way to Jerusalem ... the Triumphal Entry, the Last Supper, the Cross — it's all right around the corner.
- The crowds are building around Jesus. There's all kinds of excitement: "This is the one! The one we've waited for! He's returning to Jerusalem to set up his throne and reign!"
- You can almost feel the disciples' backs straightening up and a little pomp in their stride.
- They're with the King, and following him took them from forgotten fishermen to royal princes.

- But here at Jericho, two blind men are screaming from the roadside, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
- “Sssssshhhhh! Don’t bother the King. He’s making his grand entrance.”
- These blind men are almost certainly at the city gate where the “unclean” were cast outside.
- Likely lying on the roadside or leaned against the wall like vagabonds.
- It’s a real-life Good Samaritan scene, the non-fiction version.
- They just get louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
- Jesus stops. Diverts his path. Allows himself to be interrupted. “Who’s calling me?”
- v34 — “Jesus had compassion (*splanichizomai*) on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.” (Matthew 20:34)
- He had “Good Samaritan” compassion, from the gut compassion, “doubled over, can’t walk by, just have to help” compassion.
- This is one of SO many stories where Jesus’ is interrupted ... in fact, the ministry of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is largely one of responding to unexpected interruptions with divine compassion.

Intentional and interruptible:

- This is one of SO many stories where Jesus’ is interrupted ... in fact, the ministry of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is largely one of responding to unexpected interruptions with divine compassion.
- A life of apprenticeship to Jesus typically begins with growing more intentional (like Jesus), but that intention is meant to free us to become more interruptible (like Jesus).
- I learn the practices of ordering my life by the intentional way of Jesus ... all so I can be freed to become a living picture of the interruptible love of Jesus. Making myself more and more available to serve God’s purposes in my everyday life.
- To return to where we began this entire practice, one of the best ways to take your spiritual temperature is: to look at your automatic responses to life.
- You can think of apprenticeship to Jesus as intentionally training to become the kind of person who, when you are pressured by life, when the unplanned and unexpected come your way, *you increasingly respond and react to life the way Jesus would respond and react if he were in your shoes.*

- Bobby, the night shift hospital custodian ...
- Bobby, the apprentice of Jesus of Nazareth — in an intentional and interruptible way — served the needs of strangers until they became neighbors.
- The only reason I know that story about my Uncle is because: My Dad was in attendance that night at Bobby's humble hospital memorial, and that raspy voice from the back wall was a voice that transformed him, a voice he'll never forget.
 - Because he got off at that same exit to go to work.
 - He saw that same group of men huddled under that same overpass every morning.
 - And he had never stopped.
 - He had seen the need ... and passed by on the other side.
 - And he'd done all of this as an apprentice of Jesus with daily rhythms of Scripture reading and prayer ... weekly practices of Community and Sabbath.
- He was *intentional* but not *interruptible*.
- Was, not is, because when he saw that in Bobby: The from-the-gut compassionate interruptibility of Jesus incarnated in an otherwise ordinary person — he yearned for the endless vastness of the sea and began to build a ship — an available life that didn't sacrifice intentionality but complimented it with interruptibility.
- Let me bring this a little closer and more personal: Recently on a weekday morning, I walked outside to the sacred seat on my porch with a cup of coffee in hand, lit a candle representing God's presence, opened my hands in contemplative silence and prayed, "Come Holy Spirit."
- This is my daily practice of prayer ...
- That's when I heard it: Not the Spirit's gentle whisper, but my 2-year-old's cry ... an hour early.
- And he wasn't stopping.
- So riddle me this: What is prayer?
 - Is it holding the contemplative silence I honor each morning?
 - Or is it serving my wife by being the one to go into the room to pick my early-rising little one up out of his crib?
- Is prayer the daily *intentional* practice?

- Or is prayer attuning to God by delighting in my son, this little bundle of *interruption*?
- It's *both*, right? Of course it's both. Both are ways of communing with God.
- So how do I know which is right for this moment?
- Well, the truth is, for me, at this particular stage in my apprenticeship to Jesus: My intentional spiritual practice has outrun — by a pretty large margin — my interruptible spiritual practice.
- So that's how I know: The practice that I need this morning, even more than the sacred stillness, is the practice of free interruptibility in service to another.
- And maybe, hopefully, as I attune to God in small interruptions (like little Amos' cry), I'll grow in perception of larger interruptions (like Uncle Bobby's neighboring).

Close:

- I leave you with the simple, profound words of Mother Teresa:
- “God loves us, and we have the opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love.” (Mother Teresa)
- The Modern Church has a bias toward grand stories — stories of great adventure, great risk, great sacrifice.
 - Big, noisy worship gatherings
 - Measurable social change
 - Unexplainable miracles.
 - Impact! In every variety. success is publicly celebrated even within our doors.
- And those are good stories — ones that should be told and should be honored.
- But what if Jesus was serious when he told us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? That heaven invades earth in the small, hidden ways you and I live the way of Jesus' Kingdom in the ordinary world?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The parent, so tempted to multi-task, patiently serves her child with undivided attention?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The executive learns the name and story of a person at the bottom of the org chart

and takes an interest in them?

- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The business-woman makes decisions in line with Jesus' economy instead of stuffing her own pockets?
 - When the mother of teenagers serves her adolescent kids with the love of Jesus today in spite of yesterday because if his mercies are new every morning, so are hers?
 - When the young, successful 20-something mentors a fatherless boy through a local organization, refusing to race his colleagues up the ladder, spending his life freely on another who can never repay him?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
- Bobby pulls to the side of the road, walks back down the highway ramp, and says, "Hey guys, you must be cold ..."
- And that's the beginning of a story that will ripple far beyond his days, far beyond his life.
- A story that, if he told it, would surely include that what began as an attempt to offer life to another became the discovery of true life for him — the giver!
- The sort of life so full and so true it can only be received by giving the one I have away.
- The sort of life so full and so true it outlives even death.
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - Ordinary people actively love others like Jesus by service ... not big things, just small things, done with great love.