

Service Teaching 04:

Kinship

Intro:

- I met Sara when she was a 22-year-old senior studying theater at NYU.
 - She grew up in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas.
 - Dreamed of the bright lights of Broadway.
 - Then she got in! Accepted as a theater major to her dream school ... in her dream city!
 - She arrived, wide-eyed, and began living toward that vision of her future.
 - She also found a church community, equally widening her eyes to Jesus.
- She got together with one friend and the two of them made a simple plan: What if we read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) ... just a chapter a day ... but we agree to take Jesus seriously — to actually try to live like he's living, do the stuff he's doing — really follow him!
- A theme emerged from this little experiment: Sara couldn't shake the fact that Jesus — in scene after scene after scene — is sharing meals with the poor ... and she almost never was.
- How could she call herself a disciple of this rabbi if she's found a way of "following him" that avoids the very environments he's always taking his disciples?
- Do you see the disconnect there?
- So, she made a simple decision: There was a group of houseless folks always sitting on the sidewalk at the same corner near the NYU campus.
- Instead of eating her lunch every day among her peers, she'd take her lunch to that corner and share her food with that group of houseless folks.
- Slowly, in the days, weeks, and months that followed: She learned their names, their stories,

and they learned hers.

- They went from worlds apart to friends.
- And that turned out to be a slippery slope of the very best kind.

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)
- In our first few sessions we've covered: Loving others by meeting practical needs, serving those around us in the ordinary environments of our everyday life, often in hiddenness, and being both intentional and interruptible.
- And finally we come to: The destination at the end of service in the way of Jesus — kinship.
- And that brings us to Matthew 20.

Turn: Turn there in your Bibles. I'll meet you in verse 25 ...

- "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" (Matthew 20v25-28)
- Jesus claims to be the King of a new Kingdom, one complete with a government and authority structure ... only authority in his Kingdom is upside down according to the social order of the world.
- That's what he's doing in this passage, contrasting the order of his Kingdom to an existing order, one his disciples were very familiar with ...
- Benefactors were surrounded by rulers who oversaw households in cities full of peasants.
- There's power and privilege at the center, and it is distributed outwardly from there.
- That probably looks familiar. It's likely the structure of every social order you've ever

participated in ...

- The org chart of your company.
- The zoning of your city.
- The popularity of your high school.
- But Jesus' ministry — for three years and counting by this night — has turned the social order inside-out: Jesus was surrounded by peasants, he prioritized the injured, sick, and demonized, and the befriended tax collectors and sinners.
- That means for the powerful and privileged, the well-off and established, the socially honored and objectively successful to get near Jesus, they have to rub shoulders with the very people they've spent their lives avoiding, perhaps looked down their noses at ... or simply been socio-economically divided from.
- Jesus has structured his Kingdom in a way that very intentionally erases divisions by bringing the marginalized to the center, so those at the center come into fellowship with the marginalized.
- The very thing Jesus names to the disciples in Matthew chapter 20 he taught them in one of his more cryptic and misunderstood parables.
- Turn with me in your Bibles to Luke 16, picking up in verse 19 ...
- "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. ..." (Luke 16:19-21)
- The parable skips ahead to the apparent death of both men.
- The poor man Lazarus is at the side of Abraham.
- The rich man is separated by a great chasm, but can see the two of them together.
- He calls out to Abraham ...
 - "... I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." ... He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:27-28, 31)
- Then the credits roll.
- What a strange, unsettling story ... what does it mean?

- The key that unlocks the parable's invitation is in the *names* and *numbers*.

1. Names

- Jesus assigns a name to the poor beggar outside the gate ...
- Lazarus
- First, there's just the significance of *a* name ...
- In his 40+ parables, Jesus only ever gives one name ... here.
- That should get our attention.
- By giving this poor beggar a name, Jesus humanizes him.
- He is not a nameless face or a statistic or a pitiable stranger ... he's Lazarus.
 - Someone born to a mother and father.
 - Into a family.
 - Who carries a story like you or I do.
 - Who's been dealt a hand of circumstances and maybe played it as best he could or maybe horribly misplayed it, but either way ...
- *A name means Lazarus is more than his circumstances.*
 - He is more than his poverty.
 - More than the rags he wears.
 - More than the scraps he survives on.
- Everyone knows the names of the prestigious and powerful:
 - Herod, Pilate, Nicodemus, and Caesar in Jesus' day ...
 - The names of politicians and leaders and celebrities in ours
- But Jesus doesn't name the prestigious and powerful character in his story, only the forgotten and powerless one.
- Jesus names the nameless and the unknown. And that tells us something about Lazarus, but it tells us even more about Jesus.
- There's more than just the significance of *a* name, though.

- Consider the significance of *this* name.
- Names carried huge significance in ancient Israel — not just a parent’s preferred set of syllables but a descriptor of calling, destiny, *identity*.
- The name “Lazarus comes from the Hebrew *Eleazar*, which means, “God has helped.”
 - God is the helper for those whom the social architecture has no place.
 - God is drawn to those who most willfully ignore, unconsciously overlook, or pity with a handout and no more.
- Lazarus: a name charged with meaning, generally, *and* charged with meaning for Jesus, personally.
- Lazarus is the name of one of his closest friends:
 - The one whose dinner table Jesus knew like his own.
 - The one he wept over.
 - The one he raised from the dead.
 - The one he knew deeply and personally.
- Lazarus ... not a cause or project or mission, but a friend to know deeply and be known by deeply.
- Simply in a name, Jesus has said, “The marginalized, rejected, forgotten, needy ... I know him. I know him personally, deeply, and by name.”
- Then there’s the ...

2. Numbers

- “... I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” (Luke 16v27-28)
- At first glance, the most obvious conclusion is that the Rich Man has been condemned because he did not serve. He didn’t care for the needs of the poor leper.
- But push past the first glance. Look a little closer.
- According to the interpretation of scholars Leonard Sweet and David Fitch: The Rich man, dressed in the purple of royalty, living in luxury — *allows* — Lazarus, a houseless leper, to share in the “crumbs from his table” he longed for ... meaning he

willingly allows Lazarus to live at his front gate and eat his excess food.

- Think about that:
 - This is the front gate of a private residence.
 - The influential movers and shakers of Jerusalem are coming in and out in their chariots.
 - Passing by a houseless leper.
- Houselessness is one thing ... but leprosy was so feared it was commonly believed to be a curse from God and lepers were cast outside the city walls to fend for themselves.
- And this Rich Man was merciful enough to associate himself with Lazarus.
 - He let him crash at his gate.
 - Fed him leftover filet mignon from his business dinners.
 - On some level, he took social risks to care for him.
- How many of us have a homeless, terminally ill patient living on our porch?
- This man served the needs of the poor.
- So there must be something going on here beyond a lack of practical service ...
- The key that unlocks the story is in the numbers: "Send Lazarus to warn my five brothers ..."
- The Rich Man is urgently concerned for his people, his siblings, on a deeper level than he's ever been concerned for the man he's now trying to use as a messenger.
- Dr. Leonard Sweet concludes: The rich man is condemned because he thought he had five brothers, when God actually gave him six.
- Lutheran Theologian Joachim Jeremias referred to this story as: The Parable of the Six Brothers.
- This wasn't a sin of *injustice*: He helped alleviate Lazarus' felt need.
- It was a sin of *kinship*: He did not see him as family.
 - He did not embrace him as brother.
 - He did not welcome him all the way in to his table as his own.

- He did not include him in his community.
- The rich man didn't lack mercy. He alleviated Lazarus' suffering.
- He lacked relationship. He did not enter into that suffering with him.
 - ... he kept Lazarus in a separate space.
 - ... as a particular project.

Why?

- Because isolated acts of service are easier than welcoming someone all the way in, so they can be fully redeemed.
- Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer: "This is always our temptation when we set out to do good — to do it in a way that leaves us above the fray."
 - Practical service to the poor is the first step ... that's where we have to start!
 - But we must never confuse the first step with the destination.
 - The destination is not service-provider and service-recipient. It's brother and sister.
 - It's not giving bread to the hungry. It's, "The one who was once hungry is now breaking bread with me as family at the table."
- Kinship is what distinguishes Jesus' vision of service.
 - Kinship means people who are not biologically family are more than merely tolerated or even cared for but embraced wholly and entirely as brothers and sisters.
 - Kinship cannot happen from a safe distance. It's inconvenient and costly and involves you in a relationship.
 - Kinship is a love that enters into and relieves the burden by sharing it, shouldering some of the weight myself.
 - It means: That person is not a mouth to feed, statistic to correct, face to pity, or cause to champion — he and she are "brother" and "sister."
- That's who he's made us to one another.
- But, lest you run forward fueled by momentary inspiration, you should know that service in pursuit of kinship comes with a warning label:

Results may vary:

- I met Ramon on his way to dropping out of high school.
- And got to witness the long, beautiful redemption journey as he ...
 - Met Jesus.
 - Changed his life.
 - Became the student-body president of his high school.
 - The first in his family to attend and later graduate from college.
 - Took care of the ailing mother he once resented in his 20's.
 - Moved in with me and my family in his 30's.
 - ... and eventually established a life near us in Portland where Ramon breaks bread with us every Sabbath, and participates in my midweek community as we practice the way of Jesus together.
- Around that same time I met Ramon, I also met Andre.
- In nearly identical circumstances. He'd just dropped out of high school to get a job to take care of his newborn baby daughter
- He grew close to me. I mentored him personally.
- He, like Ramon, lived with my family for a while.
 - I took him out for his birthdays.
 - Prayed with him.
 - Laughed with him and enjoyed him.
 - Held him weeping and grieved with him.
 - Helped him get a job.
 - And dreamed with him toward a redemptive future.
- I also bailed him out of jail more than once ... watched him lose himself to drugs ... move into a homeless shelter just down the street from my house ... and walk away (at least currently) from that redemptive future we dreamed up and prayed toward together.
- Both true stories: A redemption and a heartbreak
- Results may vary.

- Why do we serve in pursuit of kinship? Not because it works ... not because it churns out redemption stories in a predictable way along a predictable timeline.
- Then why? Because every individual we serve is worth it ... and to spend ourselves on others, to enter into their suffering, that is the great reward — the life Jesus won for me.
- Parker Palmer said: “What we usually learn, once we are there, is that there is no ‘fix’ for the person who suffers, only the slow and painful process of walking through the suffering ... being there not as cure but as companion to the person who suffered on his or her slow journey.”
- It’s been my honor to share with you about the teachings of Jesus on service.
- This practice has, for me, masqueraded as a way to bring the love of Jesus to others when the truth is: the practice of service has brought Jesus’ love to me. And I hope it has for you as well.
- We conclude not just this session but this entire practice here.

Close:

- I got to know Sara, that NYU college student who moved to the big city with a Broadway dream.
- She invited me over for dinner.
- By now, she was living in the South Bronx, the poorest zip code in the US.
 - It all started with an experiment: Daring to take Jesus seriously ... seriously enough to imitate him ... to actually follow him.
 - Then there were those lunches among the houseless in the West Village.
 - Then she got to thinking, “Jesus is always ministering among prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. What are the modern-day equivalents?”
- She did some sociological research and came up with sex workers, drug dealers, and criminals.
- Did a little more research and found the part of NYC with the highest population density of those very demographics.
- And she moved there ... now the girl with the Broadway dream is showing up to class from a very different NYC.
- The voices of “reason” poured in ...

- Don't you know how dangerous that is?
- What if this or that were to happen?
- There are other ways to serve the poor.
- Why?
- Jesus. That's why. Jesus.
- So I showed up for the weekly "Family Dinner" she hosted every Monday night.
- We passed potluck dishes and cheap red wine around a table so crowded I held my plate in my lap.
 - I met an elderly grandmother who'd lived on that block her whole life after her parents immigrated from Guatemala.
 - I met a pregnant teenager trying to figure out how to finish high school while raising a newborn.
 - And a formerly-incarcerated young man about my age ... recently released, not sure where to go or how to start building a life.
 - I met a single mother who spoke no English but brought her children every Monday, thankful to have somewhere they could eat a proper meal.
- Kids ran through the house playing.
- We talked and listened and prayed.
- At the end of the night, I was fighting tears while I helped clear the table.
- Because here it was: The table of Jesus ... the Passover table around which he broke bread and poured wine ... the table Jesus got up from to wash the disciples' feet ... the table over which he said, every time you gather here, "Remember me."
- And we did. It was almost impossible to sit at that table on a Monday night and not remember Jesus.
- An 18-year-old girl moved to NYC chasing a theater dream and stayed in NYC chasing a Kingdom dream.
- All because she had the courage to look hard into the face of Jesus, listen to his invitation, "Follow me," and had the audacity to respond, "Yes. Where? To whom?"