

Service Teaching 02:

Hiddenness

Intro:

- “Is the water too hot?”
- That’s what I asked Evelyn as I plunged her right foot into the steamy, soapy tub.
- It was the first snow of the winter, unseasonably early, on a freezing windy November night.
- Hank, my 8-year-old son, stood on one side of me, ready to assist me with the drying towel.
- Simon, my 6-year-old, stood on the other, stirring three packs of Swiss Miss into about eight ounces of hot water in a styrofoam cup ... the right ratio if you want your hot cocoa a little weak (in his mind).
- We were at Night Strike, a weekly event serving the houseless in Portland, where I live.
 - There are complimentary haircuts and access to free healthcare.
 - A library of books and clothing racks full of coats.
 - Dinner, dessert, and coffee.
 - Toiletries, blankets, and other essentials.
- All of it given freely and in a profoundly dignifying way.
- On this particular night, I was holding down the foot-washing station.
- So there I am, helping an older woman, someone’s grandmother, peel off her only pair of socks, to clean her feet for the one and only time this week ... to warm them for a moment before her toes inevitably lose feeling again on this long, cold night.
- I paint *that* picture to ask *this* question: what’s the point?
- Why did I show up at Night Strike with my kids to shiver outside for a couple hours?
 - What’s supposed to happen to me here that couldn’t happen laughing over dinner

with friends at my favorite restaurant?

- Or at home drinking a cup of tea while reading a book?
- Or watching a movie on the couch with my wife?
- And not just me, but Evelyn too: what's the point?
- What's supposed to happen to her — this old, shelter-housed, lonely woman whose freezing feet are in my freezing hands — in this tub of soapy water?

Frame:

- The practice of service demands that each of us begin to look for God among the company of others who we are willfully and sacrificially loving.
- We left off last week with the idea of starting small, beginning to serve not in grandiose ways, but just where we are — in the ordinary situations of our everyday lives.
- We start there, but we don't stay there. We want our service to slowly grow to include those outside the natural overlap of our everyday.
- 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)
- Last session we laid the foundation with: Loving others by meeting practical needs
- Up for today is: The way we go about serving the people we serve — *hiddenness*.

Exegesis:

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to John 13.

I'll meet in you verse 15 in just a moment, but to set the stage:

- Jesus served at the leper colony and the seedy street corner.
- He served among the sick, poor, and oppressed.

- But his most demonstrative act and invitation to service came at his own dinner table, among his everyday company.
 - On his final night, between courses at Passover dinner, Jesus got down on his knees, and washed his disciples' feet.
 - Culturally speaking, *there was no more menial, humiliating labor than foot washing.*
 - According to rabbinical tradition, no Israelite person washed the feet of another. It was considered debased and degrading.
 - Even a Jewish slave wasn't tasked with foot washing ... only Gentile slaves taken into Jewish households.
 - Jesus didn't just pick a blue-collar task.
 - He picked the most menial task reserved for the most humble, low ranking member of the household.
 - And he did it at Passover dinner.
 - Jesus (a Jewish rabbi) did work considered unbecoming of any Jewish person at a sacred meal of preparation for a highly formal, strictly observed day of rest.
- "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13v15)
- Foot washing is not the point.
 - When Jesus told us to do as he has done for us, he didn't mean we should now literally wash each others' feet.
 - That was a highly contextual task relevant to a particular time and place — where people wore open toed sandals on dusty, dirt roads.
 - Evelyn — that beautiful old woman with tired, cold feet I met at Night Strike — Evelyn needed her feet washed, but very, very few modern people do.
 - Foot washing was one act of *service*: the expression of Christlike love through meeting the practical needs of another. And that's the point — freely giving the love of Jesus I freely received by practically meeting the needs of someone else.
- "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13v15)
 - Jesus didn't take his disciples to the leper colony to wash feet saying, "Do you see what I'm doing *for them*? I've set an example that you should do the same."

- Jesus washed the feet of his closest followers, his most familiar friends, his most ordinary company ... at his own dinner table ... among his tight-knit, everyday relationships ...
- And that upends the most common of misconceptions: That service is something I do away from my close relationships and outside of my ordinary rhythms.
- Many of us, imagining the environment where Jesus will form us into a radical gift of sacrificial love for the world, picture ...
 - A soup kitchen.
 - Or rehab program.
 - Or third world village.
- ... and don't get me wrong, it could be that. We'll get there in the coming sessions.
- Most of us tend to imagine service to be practiced among people we don't know in environments we aren't currently in, but it's worth noting that Jesus grounded service in ordinary places, and among everyday relationships.
 - The office of the business executive.
 - The kitchen of the stay-at-home parent.
 - The classroom of the high school student.
 - Studio of the designer.
 - Shared living room in the college dorm.
 - Dinner table of the married couple.
- Jesus is grounding the most sweeping, glorious of promises in the most common, ordinary places and ordinary company ... by humbly taking up ordinary service — all in the name of love.
- And that, for me at least, serves as both a *comfort* — and — a *confrontation*.
- Because the truth is: Most of us (myself included) are better at doing “projects” of love than becoming “people” of love.

The truth is:

- It's easy for me to serve Evelyn by washing her feet at Night Strike.

- I'm showing up intentionally, modeling something for my kids, and doing it in a set 90 minute time-frame.

The challenge is:

- Can I love my wife Kirsten with the same attentiveness and care as that hungry stranger when I come home tired later tonight?
- Can I love my kids with every bit as much intention as I do at the shelter later on at bedtime when they're testing my patience?
- Can I serve my co-workers tomorrow morning with a "foot washing at Night Strike" sort of selfless love in the midst of a busy agenda?
- Can I move slowly enough through my life to notice Evelyn if I pass her on the sidewalk tomorrow?

The challenge is:

- Can I drag that way of being I learn on the margins — bit by bit — back into the ordinary?
- The whole point of intentional environments of service is to become people of love in the ordinary environments of everyday life.
- And that means, for most of us, the practice of service will not begin by choosing a new environment to serve a marginalized people but choosing — actively *choosing* — a current environment to serve familiar people (think: roommates, siblings, co-workers, friends, spouse, or kids).
- What if to the circumstances of your life at present — opportunities and obligations, privileges and limitations — What if all of it is the perfect conditions through which God can form Christ in you ... *if* you choose it.
- "... There is another way of exercising freedom: less immediately exciting, poorer, humbler, and much more common, and one immensely fruitful, both human and spiritually. It is consenting to what we did not originally choose."¹
 - If we resist the hidden duties of our everyday life (caring for young children or aging parents ... mowing the lawn or cooking dinner for the family) we will grow more bitter and resentful in those very environments and relationships.
 - But if we consent to them: The ordinary people and places of our everyday become the furnace of our spiritual formation ...

- Bathing your 2-year-old and reading them a story before bed becomes a spiritual practice.
- Doing the dishes your roommate left in the sink becomes a spiritual practice.
- Visiting your aging mother and listening to her without multi-tasking becomes a spiritual practice.
- What if the conditions of your ordinary life as it is today are the perfect conditions through which God can bring heaven to earth — in you *and* through you, simultaneously?

This week's exercise is:

- One hidden act of service.
- It's the same as last week, only this time around, serve in a way that wins you nothing in front of others.
- Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute, doesn't Jesus tell us, in the Sermon on the Mount, to "Let our light shine before others that they may see our good deeds and glorify God?"
 - So sure, there are times when we should serve in ways that are visible to the world.
- However, Jesus also teaches, in the very same sermon, that service is one spiritual practice we are uniquely susceptible to doing with impure motives.
 - Service is such a visible spiritual practice, making it a good deed easily engaged for the wrong reasons.
- It's absolutely essential, then, that at least *some* of our service be done in hiddenness.
- In Matthew 6, Jesus says: "So when you give to the needy ..." (Matthew 6v2)
- The English "give to the needy" is *eleémosuné* in Matthew's Greek, a very important word but slippery to translate into English.
- Back in the day, it was translated "almsgiving," and I actually think that does a much better job.
 - Because it's not just giving money.
 - It *includes* that, but this word has a wide semantic range.
 - It's everything from tithing to your local church to serving in a nonprofit in your city to mentoring a fatherless child.
 - In other words: It's not *just* giving your money, but your resources, your time, your life

— stewarding all you’ve been given freely on behalf of others.

- It includes generosity but it’s more broad ... closer to what we call service.
- “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets ...” (Matthew 6v2)
- On one level, that’s obviously hyperbole: No one actually announced a charitable donation with a jazz soundtrack.
- But this critique is more real than you think: The giving box in the Jewish Temple was made out of a Ram’s horn.
- Similar to a shofar, which was an instrument commonly used in worship.
- Add to that the fact that money was only in the form of coins (no paper, no plastic).
 - You could quietly place a few coins in the giving box.
 - But you could also toss them in and announce your arrival with ... TING, TING, TING ... and that was the preferred entrance, especially of the big givers.
- It’s comical to look back on, but don’t we still do this in our own ways?
 - The wealthy put their names on buildings.
 - Big donations come with perks and public recognition.
 - We find ways to weave our virtuous deeds into our social media feeds or conversations.
- “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret ...” (Matthew 6v2-4)
- What, between you and God, is just between you and God?
- Do you have any secrets together?
 - You probably do with your best friend.
 - Probably do with your roommate.
 - Probably do with your spouse or significant other.
- You keep secrets with those you’re closest to. *Got any with God?*
 - What if you started volunteering one Saturday a month at a local food pantry and

didn't tell a soul?

- Or anonymously sent a check to someone else in your community who you think might need it.
- Or cleaned out your closet and gave away a few nice garments because "if you've got two cloaks, give one to someone who has none."
- ... what if you willingly chose to be slightly less fashionable to clothe the naked?
- What if you started keeping some secrets with God ... the good kind.
- Jesus concludes ...
- "... Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6v4)
- Some grimace at this part, uncomfortable with any sort of divine reward system.
- Others over-emphasize this part, turning the hiddenness of service into a prosperity scheme with God.
- And neither of those two sides of the interpretive spectrum is accurate:
 - If Jesus promises heavenly rewards, we shouldn't reject them ... and to serve in an effort to accrue rewards is obviously to undermine the entire practice of hiddenness Jesus is teaching.
- So, what sort of rewards does Jesus have in mind here?
- We don't know for sure. That's the honest answer.
- But we can say at least this much:
 - Many observe, when it comes to apprenticeship to Jesus, "You cannot give what you do not have," and there's real truth to that.
- But it's equally true that, to borrow a line from John Ortberg, "(In the Kingdom of God) You cannot keep what you do not give."
- In the economy of Jesus' Kingdom, the more you give to others, the more he entrusts you to steward.
- Any way you work it — giving is gain in God's economy. And I wonder if that's at least part of what Jesus has in mind when he speaks of heavenly rewards.
- Whatever it is, Jesus promises a reward for hidden service.

Close:

- “Is the water too hot?”
- That’s what I asked Evelyn as I plunged her right foot into the steamy, soapy tub.
- To return to where we began: what’s the point?
- What’s supposed to happen to me here that couldn’t happen over dinner with friends ... at home reading ... or watching a movie with my wife?
- Service, maybe more than any spiritual practice, is the one we are likely to pursue with right action but wrong motive.
 - Serving another because of the way it makes me look ... or the good feeling it gives me ... or to assuage some guilt or obligation.
- I think this is why Jesus singles out service as a spiritual practice best done hidden: *Where no one can see and motive can more easily fall in line with action.*
- We often ask the wrong question of spiritual practices.
- We start with: “How do I do the practice of prayer, fasting, sabbath, or service.”
- But, of course, the greater question, the first and paramount question, is: “What is the practice of service supposed to *do to me*?”
- Here, on my knees washing Evelyn’s feet I remember Jesus:
 - Jesus, who ... washes my feet, even on the night of my betrayal.
 - Jesus, who ... knows everywhere I’ve wandered and will wash every blemish and soothe every sore.
 - Jesus, who ... withholds nothing from me, for whom no part of me is too filthy or unbecoming to take into his gentle hands.
 - Jesus, the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve.
- Theologian and Anglican Priest Esau McCauley calls service an “enacted parable of the gospel” because of the way it beckons me to actively, tangibly rehearse the movements of God’s grace and mercy, freely offered *to me*.
- That’s what the practice of service does to me, it rehearses the Gospel in a tangible, livable, memorable, embodied way.

Service is:

- Being with Jesus as he washes my feet.
- Becoming like Jesus as he re-orders my priorities and pursuits.
- Doing as Jesus did as I model the free giving economy of His Kingdom.
- That's the point: For me.
- But how about Evelyn? What's the point for her?
- What's supposed to happen to this precious, shelter-housed, lonely woman whose freezing feet are in my freezing hands?
- That's where we're headed next ...

Notes

1. Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom*