

Better Together

What can happen when we align ourselves with God's mission and purpose
Message #4 – "Serving Together"

Mark 6:35-44

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Glory to God in the church!

Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!

Glory down all the generations!

*Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes! **Ephesians 3:20-21 MSG***

Hello and welcome to St. Paul's Church. My name is Matt Skillen and I am one of the pastors here. We are so blessed that you have joined us in worship. We are in the middle of a message series we're calling "Better Together." Through this series we've examined the tools and platforms that we have at our disposal to live and grow as a community. What we know, particularly through the story of Jesus in the Gospels, is that we are at our greatest--and we have our greatest potential—when we are connected. Leaning on the grace and love of God to sharpen, support and uphold one each other. Indeed, we are better together than we are apart. In everything we do, *everything* we do, when we do it together, the outcome is simply better.

Our topic today is *Serving Together* and I can't think of a more timely theme to dwell upon as we see our communities once again slowly returning to a recognizable rhythm. I hesitate to say "normal." But recognizable seems to fit. We are seeing one another outside of our homes once again, and I don't know about you, but when I see someone in public for the first time in a long time these days I am filled with absolute joy. The elbow bump, or even a hug, from a friend has become a valuable and affirming commodity in this season, amen? Who would have thought a year ago that we would arrive at such point?

What these reunions have revealed to me is that we desperately need one another. After a period of many weeks and months of being shut down and separated, I believe we are seeing once again the value of human contact, face-to-face interaction, and smiles. What joy we now find in the simple things. A short conversation about the weather. A brief update on children and relatives. Togetherness and connectedness have begun the comeback and they are building with greater intentionality and purpose. In every reunion and connection, in every reintroduction and new gathering we are seeing once again the great possibility that exists in all of us—the potential that persists when we gather, when we grow, and now when we serve together.

Before we jump into God's word, please allow me to open with a word of prayer.

Lord God we thank you for your Word and we pray that you would pour out your Holy Spirit on each and every one of us. Lord open us up to your Word and open your Word up to us. Teach us Lord what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this Lord we pray in Jesus' name - and all of God's people said, Amen.

Service. The thing about service is that you know great service when you see it and you know bad service at almost the instant you encounter it. Do you know what I mean? Good service rarely makes headlines. You don't find videos on the internet channel **YouTube** of restaurant waiters doing a stellar job, right? No, the videos posted to **YouTube** are usually of people doing a horrible job. But here's the thing about good customer service—it's the thing we all universally expect. Think about it. All of us, those of us in the house today, those of us watching online, and those of us reading at home - we all have some sense and expectation of what good customer service looks like. And here's the thing,

We, those of us who proclaim to be Christ followers, are called to serve others in service to God.

You see, I think we are all called to apply what we know about good service in our service to the Kingdom of God.

We're going to take a look at Mark's Gospel today. If you have your Bible with you, I invite you turn to Mark 6. We'll pick up this important story at about verse 30.

While you are turning there, I'll tell a quick story about a positive and negative service experience that I experienced all in the same day. You see I was a brand-new graduate student at Kansas State University. One of the first land grant institutions west of the Mississippi River. 35,000 students ascended every fall on to the small town of Manhattan, KS pursuing one of hundreds of degree programs available to them. Supporting these degree programs and connected services is a vast and intricate administrative structure that no one could really navigate. And here is where I became entangled in the web of bureaucratized education administration.

On the day I began my doctoral studies at Kansas State University's College of Education, I needed to register for classes. I filed my program of study with the Dean of Education's office and received a stamp signature from his administrative assistant. Following that exchange I walked ¼ mile to the Registrar's office to officially enroll. The registrar was a kind woman who, instead of enrolling me in my classes, indicated that I first needed to get a waiver signed by the Dean of Graduate Studies—an office that was all the way across campus.

The Dean of Graduate Studies' assistant was more than happy to stamp-sign my waiver form on behalf of the Dean so I walked all the way back to the Registrar who, upon accepting my waiver then shared the bad news that, because my academic file was currently on Academic Probation (a completely different story for another sermon), I needed to meet with an academic advisor in a separate office

before I could register. Before leaving for another trek across campus I asked the Registrar if she could simply waive this requirement she said, "That isn't my job, sir."

I was ultimately able to complete my registration. And, yes, for those of you concerned in the room, I did sort out the whole "academic probation" thing. But what I learned that day is the culture of a big university is that when anyone has a question for an official at any level, there is always someone else you pass that questions along to. I think that is why when I ultimately graduated from Kansas State two years later, I was relieved to find that not all colleges and universities are alike. When I arrived at Etown as a new professor and complete transplant to the Central PA region I found that people were more than happy to help and to help me find the information I needed. There was truly a difference.

In our story today, Jesus has been reunited with his disciples after sending them out to serve others. They were sent out in pairs to perform the very miracles that Jesus had performed in front of their very eyes. They were sent out to serve in partnership with one another and their methods must have gotten the peoples' attention because thousands began to flock to wherever they went. Jesus leads his disciples to a deserted region—a place where they could rest and recover. But the people followed them. Jesus decides to minister to the people, and his decisions in this story can teach a great deal about the calling to service we have been given through Christ's example.

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and **he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.**

After a flurry of activity in ministry, Jesus leads his crew to a boat and the plan is to take this boat to a deserted place so they can rest. It's been so crazy and there have been so many people coming and going that few have had time to even eat—the joke in the office this week is that it must have been either Christmas or Advent in Jesus's church. However, the people, recognizing them as they stepped on the boat, ran or walked to where the boat was heading and throngs of people met them when they arrived ashore.

Though they were tired, though they had traveled a good distance via boat to find a place to rest (away from all of the people) the people found them.

**In service to Christ there is no shortage
of those who need to be served.**

To quote my wise son, Wyatt, "We live in a broken world, brother." The COVID Pandemic has put a giant magnifying glass over the brokenness that we live in, amen? But let me tell you something that you probably already know. Whether we are living Pre-COVID, In-COVID or Post-COVID there will always be need. And if we have a heart for Christ our heart will also break for what breaks the heart of God. Coming off of the boat, seeing all of the people, Jesus felt compassion for the people because they were "*like sheep without a shepherd.*" So instead of returning to the boat to find a different deserted place, Jesus steps right into the crowd and begins to teach them—not some things—the text says *many* things. Speaking to the limitless mindset Jesus employed in that moment. They left to find some rest; they found need wherever they went.

³⁵When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." ³⁷But he answered them, "You give them something to eat."

As the day began to grow long, Jesus's disciples began to stir. They approached Jesus and attempted to appeal to his common sense. As if to say, "Hey Jesus, there's lots of people here. We are in the middle of nowhere. It's getting late and these people should probably go somewhere else to find some food and provision." In this way the disciples, probably from a very good place, were saying "Hey. These people should probably go find some help and, thankfully, this isn't my job."

But Jesus had a different view of it in that moment. He empowered the disciples to serve the people that were there. And in this moment of the story, Jesus reveals something that is certainly very important to us in our service to the Kingdom and that is this:

When we serve together, *it* is our job. Whatever *it* may be.

Now I want to tread very carefully here because I firmly believe all in the body of Christ have specific callings and special spiritual giftings. So, while I believe that whatever *it* is, we need to be prepared to lean in and do it, I also believe that one of the greatest resources we have when *it* needs to be done is one another.

You see, I believe there is a remarkably compounding effect generated when two or more people are serving together.

But there is more to this story. While the disciples may have looked at one another and said, "OK there are 12 of us and maybe two of us can cook... Now what?"

They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" ³⁸And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."

Given the scope of the *it* that needed to be done. The disciples lose their mind a little bit. They ask the proverbial question. "Oh, sure Jesus. Are we to go and buy a small fortune in bread to feed the people?" And isn't that how we often respond when faced with an *it*? God might be calling us to feed the homeless or expand our physical meeting space. He might be calling our church to international missions or starting a preschool center. Heck, he might even be calling us to start a second site, a second St. Paul's Church in the surround region. And what is our first reaction? *Sure, God. Should we now go find a gold mine?!*

How does Jesus respond to their question? He asks, "What do you got?" He asks, "How many loaves have you?"

So, the disciples did a quick inventory. They had to ask, "What do you got?" They had one another, that is for sure. And they had just been on a remarkable mission together and seen the power of God work through them, but that wasn't enough. They needed food. They needed provisions. When they looked, they found five loaves of bread and two fish.

Five loaves of bread and two fish.

Even the most holy and dedicated among them had think, "*What on earth are we going to do with just five loaves and two fish?*"

Let's check the score card once more.

- They had themselves. Together they had seen remarkable signs and wonders.
- They had five loaves and two fish. That's not a lot, but it is something. And by the way, you'll note they saved nothing for themselves. One of the reasons they fled to the deserted place was to rest and to eat, but they brought all they had.
- And, they had Jesus who, with the Holy Spirit was about to open Heaven's kitchen and with the dutiful service of the disciples was about to feed thousands of people with everything they had.

⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²And all ate and were filled;

Listen once again to the tremendous mercy and provision of God. When the disciples received a calling to serve, they banded together and shared what they had. Jesus blessed it and though in their minds it wasn't nearly enough, they fed everyone and the thousands of people that had gathered all ate until they were filled.

When we serve together what we have is **compounded by the Spirit.**

Not only through the work we do together, but through the Holy Spirit working through us.

The greatest ally we have in our service to the Kingdom is the Holy Spirit. Earlier in this service we read from the book of Ephesians in which the Apostle Paul reminds the new Christians in Ephesus that our God is great, and He truly can do anything—more than we could ever guess, request or imagine. Think of it. If in your quieter moments you see a need and think to yourself there is no possible way that I could ever imagine... The word of God says.... think again.

**God can truly do more
than you could ever guess, request or imagine.**

And if that isn't amazing enough, take a look at the crazy conclusion of this story. The disciples gave everything they had to Jesus so they could serve the needs of thousands of hungry and tired people—the people that Jesus had specific compassion for because they were like wandering sheep who had no one to lead them. The disciples served God's people until they were full. Then watch what happened next.

⁴³and they took up *twelve* baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Let me ask you a simple question: *How many disciples did Jesus have?*

12. That's right. After they had served everyone in the crowd they went back and collected 12 baskets of bread and fish. You see no one, not even the disciples, went hungry that day. And while the number of 5,000 is shared in the text you will note that only the men were counted at this day and time. There were, likely, at least ten or fifteen thousand people if you then also counted the women and children that would have been present. Friends, that is the God we serve and when we serve together, He can do remarkable things—things greater than we could ever imagine, guess or request.

**The disciples banded together.
They received a call to serve.
They brought what little they had.
God blessed it and multiplied it.**

In our reunions and as we continue to regather as a church, my prayer is that our communities will know that we are once again united because they will see the work that God is doing through us when we band together. When those who follow Christ partner together they are never alone. They walk with the authority and backing of the Holy Spirit. Everything they bring is more than enough because ***our God is not the God of a little; he is the God of much***, so whatever your concern may be; wherever you see need—no matter what *it* may be. Know this God can use you to help someone else. Bring someone along with you when you go. Together we are better because we serve a tremendous God.