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Going Beyond Ourselves—The Discipline of Service
Mark 8:31-38

Several years ago, a successful young financial planner repeatedly asked me to lunch to discuss spiritual matters. Over those lunches, I heard him describe his desire for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more Life. He seemed to know that there was more to life than meets the eye, but when he was in the presence of those places and people where such knowledge was supposed to flourish, he found them hollow and lacking. I finally realized that Richard was one of those persons who enjoyed studying menus more than enjoying a great meal.

People, like my friend Richard, have drawn close to this “More” in nature, in love, in grief, in movies, in the arts. They would be happy for someone to teach them how to experience this deeper reality¹, but when they move from the thinking and talking about it to the doing stage, something happens.

The early disciples had a problem at this precise point. They knew the “More” existed. It was the doing of those things which would take them deeper that caused them problems. They resented little children distracting Jesus. Wasting expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus, as Mary of Bethany did, seemed a disgrace—not to mention the sensuous charge it ignited in everyone watching her dry his feet with her hair. Being asked to organize a meal in the countryside for five thousand people seemed a point of irrelevancy.

The disciples were attracted by the “More” they experienced in Jesus. Following his example was their problem. When they gathered for this Passover Meal—a meal that would be their last together—their earlier concerns about each person’s value to the group still loomed. Who would sit near the head of the table? The common practice of washing the feet of guests—usually by the host’s slave or servant—was dismissed in their minds. There was no slave or servant

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World* (New York, HarperOne: 2009), xiv.

present and all of them were guests. It was Jesus who took a towel and a basin of water and began to wash the feet of those who followed him. (John 13)

Going beyond ourselves, when it comes to getting needs met, is something with which our current society doesn't do well. We prefer to be waited on, served, and taken care of by someone else. Moms and dads usually pick up the tabs. When sons and daughters begin reversing the courtesy, it is an inward point of parent celebration. They are growing up. They are moving beyond themselves.

Making their way to Jerusalem, Jesus told his followers that he anticipated trouble for himself once there—trouble like being rejected by the temple officials, perhaps, being beaten by Roman peace officers, and maybe even losing his life. With that, Peter pulled him aside, telling Jesus that such a plan as to go to Jerusalem under those circumstances was not wise, and such talk before his followers would scare them away.

This semi-private conversation led to a short lecture on saving one's life. Turning back to the larger group, Jesus said: "If you are intent of saving your life, you will lose it in the long run; but if you are willing to lose your life for a righteous cause, you will find your "authentic self," to borrow a Baggar Vance phrase. What good is it to live a long life if you know you have avoided doing what is right and violate your personal integrity?" It was another lesson on how we are to serve one another. For in the doing of service we discover the deeper dimensions of Life and God and Energy.

One of the hardest six days in my life was spent in New Orleans before New Orleans met Katrina. It was hard, not because of intense labor or intense relationships, but because it required intense patience. The Youth Pastor at the church I was serving had planned a youth mission trip during their Spring break. He asked if I would consider joining the youth and their counselors. I did.

Our point of service was with a small inner city Pentecostal church. The church was in the lower level of a building used for housing. The African-American pastor had identified church repairs that had been postponed, as well as work with the homeless ministry. We ate in the soup line with other homeless people. Our point of work was painting the inside of their worship area.

My problem was that what we were to be doing didn't seem nearly as important as a dozen other things I could think of—there, or back in Meridian, Mississippi. It seemed in my own mind that such use of our time would be inefficient and, possibly, ineffective. Plus, I couldn't imagine what the place was going to look like after twenty-five youth and counselors inexperienced in painting were finished with paintbrushes and buckets.

The pastor directed some of the youth to the pulpit and others of us to the altar rail that had small delicate spindles. "Oh, my God," was my only thought. "He is braver than I." "Damage control" was my secondary thought, so I made my way with paintbrush and bucket to the small white spindles with several others. After half a day of painting spindles that looked better before we started than afterwards, I began to find that the altar rail became a place of important conversation, rather than a surface for applying a new color. Giving up the need to be efficient made way for spending time with new friends of this depressed neighborhood and to care for their sacred alter. The painting was not an end in itself; it became a means to grow closer to my youth, and the alter I was painting in this inner city Pentecostal church became a place of worship for me.

The last place most of us look for the extraordinary experiences is right under our feet in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters we have. How can something as inconvenient as painting spindles on an old altar be a door to the greater Life?

Of all the spiritual practices we can engage in, service is the most conducive to the growth of humility. Serving others who follow you purifies your motives and helps you gain perspective...it also brings to the surface and impure motives of those under your leadership.² The practice of service can be a door to a deeper encounter with the "More" of Life. Rotarians have promoted this motto for years: "Service above self," and its secondary motto: "They profit most who serve best." Doing service is not the same as living a life of service.

² John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson: 2007), 64.

Here are several of Foster's ways we might give ourselves to the practice of service during the Lenten season.³

The service of hiddenness. You don't always have to let your service to someone or some cause be known. Quietly doing things that help or bless is a discipline of its own and provides an inner quiet joy to the server.

The service of small things. Stopping to provide simple help qualifies. Get someone a cup of coffee. Take a few moments to give your undivided attention to a child. Serve your community by picking up the piece of trash on the sidewalk rather than stepping over it. Be conscious of the simple needs of other customers or the store's employees the next time you are at the grocery store...as you leave this building today.

Foster speaks of "**the service of guarding the reputation of others.**" During the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, a song rose up in the church that we seldom sing anymore and one whose challenge has often been forgotten:

*We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.
We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."*

Guarding other's dignity and saving their pride is a pattern I've watched in former President Carter's work for international peace and conflict resolution. We can clothe backbiting in all the religious language we want, but it still remains a deadly poison. A kind word encouraging someone to speak directly with another is often enough to divert malicious conversation.

Foster continues his list with:

the service of allowing yourself to be served;

the service of common courtesy (our first President, George Washington, kept a journal that has become known as *Rules of Civility*, and P.M. Forni wrote a classic little book titled *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct*;

the service of hospitality that Diana Butler Bass considers to be "number one" of "Ten Signposts" of a healthy and growing church;

³ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (New York, Harper and Row: 1988), 117-122.

the service of bearing the burdens of each other;

the service of listening;

and **the service of sharing the word of Life.** Foster's last "service" category is also among Bass's Lilly Foundation findings among mainline churches. It is a service to gracefully share your experiences of life with others...and doing so with wisdom and discretion. It is especially important for the church to serve each other by sharing the learned wisdom of God.

During the next week, I encourage you to let this be your Lenten "morning prayer:" *Loving Lord, open my eyes to those whom I can serve this day.*
AMEN.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

1When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

15God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

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Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."