

Serve Joyfully **Psalm 100; 1 Peter 4:8–11**

For three weeks, we are reflecting together on the vision statement of The United Methodist Church: Love boldly. Serve joyfully. Lead courageously. Last week, we reflected on what it means to love boldly. Today, we turn to the second part: serve joyfully.

When we think about Christian teaching, some things can sound almost contradictory at first. “Love your enemies.” “Lose your life to find it.” “The last shall be first.” And “serve joyfully” may feel like one of those phrases too. Because serving is not always joyful.

Have you ever been to an all-inclusive resort or taken a cruise? One of the reasons people love those places is that you do not have to do much. You are served. Food is prepared for you. Someone makes the bed. Someone cleans the room. If you need something, the crew takes care of it. That sounds pretty nice, doesn't it?

In ordinary life, being served usually feels easier than serving. Eating a meal someone else prepared is easier than planning the meal, cooking it, setting the table, serving everyone, and then washing the dishes afterward.

And yet, the Bible keeps calling us to serve. Jesus said that he came not to be served, but to serve. At the Last Supper, Jesus got down on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples. Then he said, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” So we know service is important. We believe it. We value it.

But if we are honest, service can also feel heavy. There is so much to do, and often not enough people to do it. Twenty years ago, when our bodies were stronger and there were more hands to help, maybe it felt a little easier. But as the years go by, our bodies change. Our energy changes. And sometimes there are fewer able bodies to share the work. So the work falls on the same few people again and again. And even when we love the church, even when we want to serve, our bodies and hearts get tired. Then service starts to feel less like joy and more like a burden.

Every November, our church has our annual bazaar. It is a wonderful ministry of fundraising and connecting with our community. But imagine if someone said, “This went so well. Let's do it three times a year.” Can I get an amen? Maybe not. Most of us would probably say, “Pastor, we need to pray about that for a very, very long time,” because we know how much work it takes and how tired people are afterward. Right?

When our bodies are tired, when the hands are few, and when the work feels endless, how can we still serve joyfully? I believe one thing we need is a change in the way we see service. When we hear the word “service,” we often think of something we do. “I serve God by doing this. I serve the church by doing that. I serve my neighbor by helping with this ministry.” And of course, service does involve doing.

But in Scripture, service is not only about what we do. Service begins with who we are. In Genesis, God does not create human beings as slaves. God creates human beings in the image of God. That means our deepest purpose is not to produce more and more. Our deepest purpose is to reflect God. We are created to reflect God's character, God's goodness, God's mercy, God's love, and God's light into the world.

We are like mirrors. A mirror does not make its own light. A mirror does not say, “I need to work harder and produce more light today.” No. The calling of a mirror is simply to face the source of light and reflect that light. That is our calling too.

Psalms 100 says it beautifully: "The Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." Before we do anything for God, we belong to God. Before we serve, we are loved. Before we produce, we receive grace. Before we give anything, we first hear this good news: "You are mine. You are my beloved child. You are the sheep of my pasture." That truth comes before every committee meeting. It comes before every bazaar. It comes before every visit we make, every card we send, every prayer we offer.

Service is not squeezing the last drop of energy out of our exhausted bodies so that we can prove our worth to God. Service is standing before God, receiving God's love, and then reflecting that love to others. For the children of God, service is not a report card. Service is a response of love.

Next Sunday is Mother's Day. When I was a young child in Korea, every year around Parents' Day, we did the same thing at school. We made little paper carnations, and we drew pictures for our parents. The theme was usually something like, "My Loving Family." Now, I need to confess something to you: I am not good at drawing. I mean, really really not good. One time, I worked very hard on a drawing, and my teacher looked at it, gave me a good old-fashioned smack on the back, and said, "Stop joking around and draw it again." But I was not joking. That was my best work. So you can imagine what my drawing of my parents looked like. The faces were strange. The arms and legs were not the same length. The proportions were all wrong. It was not exactly museum quality.

But when I brought that picture home, how do you think my parents responded? Did they say, "Yohan, you have been alive for eight years, and this is all you can do?" No. They smiled. They were happy. They received it with joy. Why? Because they loved me.

I could draw that picture with joy because I was not drawing it to earn their love. I already had their love. That little picture was simply my clumsy, childish, heartfelt response to the love I had already received. A loving parent does not look first at the quality of the work. A loving parent sees the heart of the child.

And I think serving God is like that. We do not serve God in order to be accepted by God. We do not serve God because God has some need that we must fill. We serve because God made us, because we know we are loved by God, and because we joyfully respond to that love by loving God, loving the church, and loving our neighbors.

As 1 Peter says, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." We serve with the gifts we have each received. And I am grateful that our church has so many people who do this.

Andrea, with her overflowing energy and leadership, organizes and leads the golf tournament, the women's tea party, and the bazaar. And then the Asbury church family joins together joyfully, each person bringing their own gifts to help with the bazaar and other events. Diane makes beautiful Thanksgiving baskets. Barbara and the women's group bake bread. Last year, Evelyn, Becky, and Zach took care of the kitchen, preparing and serving delicious food. People baked cookies, cleaned and organized jewelry, and served the church with joyful hearts. Joyce Moore always warmly welcomes visitors and speaks with them. One church member once said that if it had not been for Joyce, they probably would not have become part of Asbury. I cannot mention every name, but all of us, in our own ways, with our own gifts, personalities, and places of service, are serving the church and one another with joy.

But maybe some of you are thinking, "Pastor, I can't do those things anymore." And that is okay. Because the church does not only need people who serve. The church also needs people who are willing to receive. That is something we often forget.

When we talk about serving, we usually think about the person who gives. The person who volunteers. The person who helps. And yes, those people experience grace. But the person who receives also experiences grace. And sometimes, receiving is not easy.

Think about Peter at the Last Supper. When Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet, Peter said, "Lord, you will never wash my feet." Maybe Peter was thinking, "Lord, I should be serving you. How can you serve me? I should be doing something for you. How can I just sit here and receive?" Don't we feel that way sometimes?

When someone helps us, we may feel like we are becoming a burden. When someone serves us, we may feel guilty because we cannot return the favor. But Jesus says to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." That is a deep word.

Following Jesus is not only about doing many things for Jesus. Sometimes following Jesus means allowing Jesus to love us. Sometimes it means admitting, "Lord, I am weak today. I need your grace too." Faith does not mean we are always strong. Faith does not mean we are always the ones giving. Sometimes faith means opening our hands and receiving. Sometimes faith means letting someone else help us.

So please do not feel guilty if you cannot serve in the same way you used to. Your presence here matters. Coming to church and worshiping with us is already a gift. Receiving a meal someone prepared with gratitude is a gift. Smiling and saying "thank you" is a gift. Letting someone help you is also a gift. Because serving is not something we do alone. Serving is a relationship of grace.

Someone prepares the meal, and someone receives it with joy. Someone plants the flowers, and someone says, "They are beautiful." Someone cleans the church, and someone sits in that clean space and prays. And through all of that, the church is built up.

So if your body is not what it used to be, please do not be discouraged. If you cannot serve the way you once did, please do not feel ashamed. Serve with joy when you can. Receive with gratitude when you need to. And together, as those who give and those who receive, may we build up the church, the body of Christ. Amen.