

Service Teaching 01:

Love

Intro:

- What thermometer do you use to measure your spiritual temperature?
- How do you know when you're maturing, and how do you know when you're regressing?
 - What makes you feel close to God, and what makes you feel distant?
 - Spiritually strong, and spiritually weak?
 - When I'm hot, cold, or lukewarm, how do I tell?
- Maybe, for you, it's your moral decisions ...
 - Having one too many at Friday's happy hour?
 - This week's internet history?
 - The anger or patience with which you spoke to your co-workers, spouse, or kids?
- For others, it's likely the quality of your spiritual practice ...
 - How many times you cracked the Bible this week
 - Prayer habits
 - Follow-through on your commitments to silence, rest, or generosity
- What thermometer do you use to measure your spiritual temperature?
- You ever think about that? We ask because you definitely have one.
- And whatever it is affects you mentally and emotionally.
- But if it's the wrong instrument it can't give you the right information.
 - Is your instrument telling you the truth?
 - Is it giving you an accurate reading?
- Most importantly of all: Is it the same instrument Jesus prescribes for checking spiritual health?

Frame: This Practice was created to help you apprentice under Jesus.

- We define apprenticeship (or discipleship) to Jesus as a life organized around three driving goals:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus
 3. And to do as he did
- And Jesus said this about his identity and mission: "... The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve ..." (Mark 10v45) So if it's Jesus we are going to apprentice under, if it's from him we learn how to live in the Kingdom of God, we too must serve.
- The spiritual practice of **service** is: **the expression of Christlike love through meeting the practical needs of another, especially those most in need of help.**

Service is:

1. **Being with Jesus** among the needs of others where he promises his presence.
2. **Becoming like Jesus** as I'm shaped increasingly into his image by imitating his self-giving love.
3. **Doing as he did** as I make his mission my own.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 7, I'll pick up in v16 ...

- Jesus, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, explains how to recognize spiritual health, a thermometer for taking spiritual temperature.
- *By their fruit you will recognize them.* Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7v16-20)
- Jesus, never one to miss a chance for a well-placed agricultural metaphor says: *fruit*. That's how you know. It's how you measure. It's how you take your spiritual temperature.
- For the first time in my life, I'm trying my hand at gardening at the moment — attempting to grow a few veggies.
- And these little sprouts require daily tending ...

- Pulling up little weeds.
- Gentle watering.
- And so forth.
- And there's tons of mystery ...
 - I'm learning that not all soil is created equal.
 - There are conditions, under the earth, that determine the quality of growth.
 - Agriculture is more an art than an exact science.
- But there *is* a definite way to solve the mystery, to know how those little sprouts are doing come harvest time: *fruit*.
- Your spiritual life is like the sprouts in my mulch bed ...
 - Bursting with potential.
 - Requiring daily care.
 - And more an art than a science ... requiring trial and error, slow cultivation year over year ... involving seasons of full, green leaves in the sunshine and seasons of long, cold, dark days — both of which are necessary for growth.
- However, there is a thermometer, a way to get a clear and accurate reading on how you're doing: *fruit*.
 - Healthy plants with strong roots draw life from the soil where they're planted, producing fruit in season.
 - And a plant that's not drawing life, well, no fruit.
- That's how you know. It's the instrument Jesus uses for checking spiritual temperature.
- Let's try to pull that from the abstract of ancient metaphor into the reality of modern life by exploring three soul-conditions, three ways Jesus uses this word fruit ...
 - Fruitless
 - Fruitful
 - Firstfruits

Fruitless:

- First, fruitless. A few pages later, in Matthew's Gospel, we read ...
- "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Matthew 12v33)
- Now, this is interesting: Jesus says almost the same thing here, in Matthew 12, that he said back there in Matthew 7.
 - He's making the same point, but the context is different, which adds a little color — a little reality to the metaphor.
 - Back in chapter 7, Jesus was teaching the gathered crowds who were eager to learn, eating up every word.
 - Here in chapter 12, though, his comment is an arrow meant to pierce. It's sharp. And it's aimed at a certain somebody.
- Jump up to the top of the chapter — "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them." (Matthew 12v1)
 1. Jesus is strolling through a grain field on the Sabbath day — a sacred day set aside for rest and celebration — and his disciples are helping themselves to some of the *fruit*, snacking on heads of grain
 2. As the story progresses, the Pharisees (a strict sect of priests) take issue because, "... not to a stickler here, rabbi, but that's technically harvesting ... it's work ... and the Law forbids work on the Sabbath."
 3. And Jesus schools them by comparing himself to David, even insinuating he's the fulfillment of King David — an ancient Jewish way of *claiming* he's God walking among us as King.
- That's Jesus for: "You guys are missing the forest for the trees."
- When the *how* of spiritual formation (like keeping the rules perfectly on the Sabbath) ...
- Outruns the *why* of spiritual formation (the rest and celebration those laws are meant to free you and others to enjoy) ...
- Your spiritual practice is drained of power to form you, or worse, it *deforms* you (instead of being people resting and delighting in a God who keeps his promises and provides for his children ...

- ... these guys are morally policing everybody else, they're uptight on the Sabbath day — the opposite of restful, easy, peaceful company).
- You're taking your spiritual temperature by the wrong instrument: So it's reading healthy because you're keeping the rules, but the way you're keeping the rules is making you rotten, fruitless ... not *fruitful*.
- See what Jesus is getting at?
- He offers an accurate reading of their spiritual health — based on his *true* instrument, not their faulty one — verse 33: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” (Matthew 12v33)
- Jesus is talking to the most devout sect of priests in Israel.
 - These are the people keeping the very practices Jesus says will form us into his apprentices — the very same ancient practices we celebrate and commend you to here at Practicing The Way — *but they've lost the plot*.
 - They've confused the *why* and the *how*.
 - They've slowly, over time, likely backed by very good intentions, become people who keep the practices but have lost track of *why* they started the practices in the first place and *who* they're aiming to become.
 - And when the HOW of spiritual formation outruns the WHY of spiritual formation, it leaves me *fruitless*.
- And that takes us from *fruitless* to ...

Fruitful:

- Jesus, when asked what the most important command in Scripture was, gave a common, predictable answer: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”
- What was less predictable though, and set Jesus apart from the other rabbis of his day, was what followed: “And a second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Jesus inseparably joined together love for God and people.
- *The way I love others is directly connected, even revealing, of the true state of my heart toward God.*
 - If I read the Bible every morning before the sun comes up for years and years but I'm not becoming kinder to my co-workers, I'm better off sleeping in.

- If I volunteer at the soup kitchen or homeless shelter as a means of appeasing my conscience, I might as well stay home.
 - If I pray morning, midday, and evening, but it's not making me a more empathetic friend or patient parent, I'm missing the forest for the trees.
 - If *practicing the way of Jesus* isn't filling me to overflowing with *the love of Jesus*, I'm nothing more than *noisy* — religiously busy but out of tune with God's redemption in me and the world around me.
 - But if *practicing the way of Jesus* is deepening my own experience of God's irrevocable love to the degree that I increasingly *serve* others with the same kind of *love* then my life is harmonizing with the renewal of the world.
- Jesus would go on to say: "... As I have loved you, so you should love one another." (John 13v34)
 - We love God not by exclusively giving love *back to God* but also by giving love actively to others.
 - All spiritual practice ...
 - Contemplative silence and worship in community
 - Midweek fasting and Sabbath feasting
 - ... is meant to free us to become people of *love*.
 - To borrow a phrase from Dr. Robert Mulholland: *spiritual formation is for the sake of others*.
 - The aim and destination of the spiritual journey is not work/life balance, personal peace, or even character formation (as an end in itself) but to *become love* — that my inner journey of formation would pour out of me actively in *service* to others.
 - Love, in the Christian imagination, is different than in our modern, Western sense.
 - It's not just nice, warm feelings of goodwill toward "humanity" generally.
 - *But incarnate, embodied, practical actions of self-sacrificial service, as we see in Jesus.*

That's service: to willfully enter into the life of another, at cost to myself, that they might have more life.

- Spiritual formation does benefit me certainly — it offers a sense of peace, self-discovery, freedom, and joy — life and life to the full!

- The evidence though, that it's Jesus' image I'm being formed into — the gauge of my spiritual formation — is: *Am I becoming a person of love to the people who know me best and interact with me most frequently?*

How do I take my spiritual temperature?

- The gentle or harsh tone I use with my roommates or spouse
- The interruptibility (or lack thereof) I embody toward my neighbors
- The patience I carry, or don't, toward my kids
- The compassion I offer my coworkers, or judgment I chip away at them with
- The thermometer that takes our spiritual temperature is: Love, expressed practically as *service*.
- *Service* isn't just another practice but one that makes *all of our spiritual practice* filled to the brim with formative power.
- And that's what it means to become ...

Firstfruits:

- We began with Matthew 7, when Jesus claims that loving fruitfulness is the evidence of spiritual health.
 - What we're yet to address, though, is the apocalyptic direction he takes this idea.
 - Look back with me at Matthew 7, verse 19 — “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 7v19)
 - In John 15, when Jesus uses the “vine and branches” metaphor to paint a nearly identical picture — “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit ...” (John 15v5)
 - Aaaaaaaahhhhhh. If he stopped there, it's like spa theology. Relax in the eucalyptus air with Jesus.
 - But he doesn't stop there. He rolls right into ...
 - “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” (John 15v6)
 - And that lands a touch different, doesn't it?

- It's more cold plunge than steam room.
- What's up with the apocalyptic flavor?
 - Jesus connects the imagery of fruitfulness to the end of the age, to his return to reign as King — when he will wipe away every tear, heal every wound, correct every injustice, and restore the *loving*, good order of Eden.
 - He's claiming that you and I are living in concert with one of two Kingdoms *right now* with each and every choice we make — the world that's passing away or the age to come.
 - And that the invisible Kingdom we are rooted in is revealed not in the creeds we recite or the community we're a part of — *or even the practices we order our days by* — but by our: *fruit*.
- The Apostle Paul picks up this train of thought:
 - “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15v20)
 - When Jesus burst forth from that tomb on Sunday, the first seed of eternal life to take root and break corrupted soil, he was “firstfruits.”
 - What does that mean?
- I'm a sucker for Fall. Always have been.
 - I daydream of summer on dreary winter days.
 - I like the colors of spring.
 - But for me, I've never been able to resist crisp air, crackling fires, and pumpkin bread.
- I'm a sucker for Fall.
 - In the American Pacific Northwest, where I live, if you visited an apple orchard in late August, there'd be a couple apples on the trees.
 - You'd be sweating.
 - Hot, mulled cider would be a huge mistake.
 - You'd be waaaaaaay too early for baking pumpkin flavored anything, even for me.
 - But you *would* see a few apples on the trees.

- Those August apples, they're called "firstfruits."
- They're out of season; It still feels like summer in every way. They arrived early, long before the days got shorter and the air felt crisp.
- But they're *promisingly* out of season: Meaning those firstfruits apples are *early signs of a full-blown atmospheric change*.
 - And it's coming whether you like it or not
 - Coming whether you're ready or not
 - It's coming and it's good news
- Those apples are signs of a total change of season, an atmospheric shift that will sweep over the whole world, transforming all of creation.
- That's what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is: Firstfruits. An early promise of a sweeping atmospheric change for all of creation — the re-unification of heaven and earth.
 - James 1 says, " He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." (James 1v18)
- You and I are firstfruits in a corrupted creation: An early promise of a sweeping atmospheric change — the re-unification of heaven and earth.
 - Our lives of *service* are like August apples.
 - We are "*promisingly out of season.*"
 - An early sign of a sweeping atmospheric change that will envelop all of creation.
 - An age when the labor is coming to an end and the promised feast is drawing near.
 - Jesus didn't burst forth from the tomb *just* to proclaim forgiveness of individual sins but to promise a new social order ... one where the way to *life* is freely giving mine away in loving *service* to others.

Close:

- How do we do it?
- How do we become firstfruits?
- How does our spiritual formation make us people of whose lives are early promises of a

renewed world?

- At the risk of underwhelming you with simplicity, you: *start where you are and start today.*
- Samuel and Pearl Oliner extensively researched Holocaust rescuers.
 - They interviewed over 700 individuals in an effort to discover what caused some non-Jewish Europeans to risk their lives sheltering oppressed Jews during European Nazi occupation.
 - And the conclusion of their research was that the distinguishing characteristic of rescuers vs. non-rescuers was: The individual's practice of loving *service* to others in their ordinary relationships and everyday environments *prior to the war.*
- In the researchers' own words: "Respective wartime behaviors grew out of their general patterns of relating to others." (Samuel and Pearl Oliner)
- Those most likely to *serve* in extraordinary ways when the pressure is on were those who practice *service* in ordinary ways when the pressure is off.
- Start where you are (not where you aren't):
 - Don't start by volunteering at a new agency in your city ... or joining a team at your church you aren't already invested in.
 - That will certainly be a part of your practice as we mature in service, but it's not the start.
- Imagine the ordinary people and everyday environments of your life at present.
- How might you, simply and humbly, get your shoulder under someone else's burden and share the weight?

Start today (not tomorrow):

- This week's exercise is one act of service.
- The smaller and simpler — the better.
 - Meal prep for your spouse at the beginning of this week
 - Sit down and help your daughter with her homework
 - Pick up a coffee for a co-worker when you're stepping out anyway
 - Go and personally drop off the tool or luggage or power adapter your neighbor needs to borrow

- One act of service, not for the sake of what it will produce in someone else, but what it will produce *in me* — fruit on the branches of my life abiding in the vine.
- Service is one practice expressed 4 key ways:
 1. Love
 2. Hiddenness
 3. Availability
 4. Kinship
- That's where we're going in the coming sessions, but it all starts with *love*: Loving others by meeting practical needs.
- How do *I* become the firstfruits of the greatest promise?
- How do *I* become a sure sign of heaven on earth?
- Not by inspiration. Not by grand action.
- But by *starting where we are* (not where we want to be) and *starting today* (not tomorrow).

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. Jacque Philippe, *Interior Freedom*

Service Teaching 03:

Availability

Intro:

- Today Mother Teresa is a household name all over the world. Nobel Prize winner. Icon of justice. Canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church.
- But for most of her life she was an entirely unknown nun from Albania, serving in a poor neighborhood with a small group of sisters ...
- Mother Teresa devoted her life to serving the suffering and dying in Calcutta, a poverty-stricken and forgotten slum ... where she founded a monastic order known as “The Sisters of Charity” who continue her work to this day, even after her death.
- A sign hangs above the door that leads from their humble convent onto the slum streets outside: There are no great things today, only small things done with great love
- A little sign that guided their founder’s hidden steps for decades, then ... and after 30 years in Calcutta, guided Mother Teresa’s words in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.
- “God loves us, and we have the opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love.” (Mother Teresa)

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)
- And in this session, we look at at the two-sided coin of how we practice service: Becoming both *intentional* and *interruptible*.

Exegesis:

Turn: Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 22, where Jesus responds to a question from a highly educated Bible teacher about the most important biblical command.

- Jesus responds — verse 37 — “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:37-39)
- Jesus inseparably joins together our love for God and people, making service an essential practice for the formation of all his apprentices.
- In Luke’s account, though, the teacher of the Law presses for specificity: “And who is my neighbor?”
- In other words, “Who rabbi, am I responsible to serve?”
 - To whom will I give an account before God?
 - Who has God given me to love, practically, by the very love I’ve freely received?
- French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupery famously said: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”
- That’s how Jesus responded to the question.
- Not with a direct response but a story ... a story aimed at awakening vision, a deeper sort of longing than the self-rationalization this man sought. He paints a picture to awaken him (and us) to yearn for the vast and endless sea.

A picture known as “The Good Samaritan:”

- Walking the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, a notoriously dangerous route in Jesus’ day due to crime, a man gets mugged, left robbed and bleeding on the sidewalk ...
- A priest sees him but passes by on the other side of the street
- Next, a Levite (a particular type of priest) sees him but pretends not to ... passes by and gets along with his day
- There is growing psychological evidence that human beings are pre-wired to respond to one another’s suffering.
 - From birth, an infant who hears another infant crying or in distress will respond

automatically by their own cries. A baby, perfectly at peace, will impulsively share the distress of another.

- Which is why daycares and orphanages tend to be quiet together and loud together.
- As early as 14 months, a baby who hears the crying of another infant will attempt to intervene — doing something to alleviate another’s suffering.
- Human beings are neurologically wired, at the level of primal instinct, to do something about the suffering of another.
- Meaning that to see a human being in distress and pass by (like the ailing stranger in Jesus’ parable or the needy person in your city) is not merely evidence of a lack of spiritual formation ... *it’s actually evidence of human de-formation* — the loss of true humanity, the diminishment of God’s divine image within me to some degree.
- Next, a Samaritan, the ethnic “less-than’s” of Israel, thought to be spiritually misguided (to put it politely).
- Most of Jesus’ audience thought of Samaritans as half-breeds and heretics ...
- A Samaritan walks by.
- v33 — “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.” (Luke 10v33)
 - The English, “Pity” is the Greek, “*splanchnizoma*” and it’s mostly translated “compassion.” It’s a feeling word, meaning, “from the gut.”
- This Samaritan didn’t “feel for this guy.”
- He “felt for this guy” — a doubled over in his gut, can’t walk by, just have to help — kind of feeling.
- And it’s not a single stop.
- **He enters into his pain in the moment** (allowing himself to be interrupted).
- **He pays for his healing and rehabilitation slowly, over time, at his own expense** (compassionately co-suffering with him, shouldering this stranger’s burden alongside him in a costly way).
- **And he returns to him** (remaining in relationship over time, meaning it’s not a transactional moment but a kinship relationship of mutual love born from the interruption).

- “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10v36-37)
- The story began with a man asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”
- And Jesus flips the question back on that man, essentially asking, “Who made that stranger in need on the roadside into a neighbor?”

Seam:

- My uncle Bobby lived a humble life. Worked at a hospital in Nashville as a night shift custodian.
 - Diagnosed with leukemia in his early 40’s.
 - Died tragically young, at 43 ... leaving behind a wife and two daughters.
- The hospital, where he was loved, held a short gathering of remembrance for family and co-workers.
- As expected, it was modestly attended, just a few folks crowding into a small hospital room during the night shift ... to share stories and memories.
- A couple minutes later, a few obviously disheveled men, likely houseless, quietly entered the room, and stood against the back wall.
- People were sharing stories and memories about Bobby.
- A silence hung between stories, the way it does at gatherings like these ...
- Waiting for someone else to speak up.
- A raspy, kinda slurred-sounding voice broke the silence: “Every winter night,”
- It was one of those guys lining the back wall: “Every winter night, Bobby brought us blankets on his way to work at the hospital. In the morning, on his way home, he’d pick them up, have them laundered, and do it all over again the next night.”
- This group of men lived under one particular interstate overpass in downtown Nashville.
- Bobby got off at that exit to go to work.
- Noticed them there, trying to sleep in the cold under the covering.
 - Served them.

- Learned their names.
 - Shared his life, and they shared theirs.
 - Became their friends.
- He'd apparently been doing this for years. No one knew. Not even his wife.
 - He'd done it in secret, not letting his left hand know what his right hand was doing.
 - When that rough-around-the-edges stranger spoke up, the most tragic moment of Bobby's life was transformed into the most powerful. That makeshift memorial in a hospital room was as all-of-a-sudden as holy as any cathedral's ever been.
 - All because he'd "seen a need and stopped ... making a stranger into a neighbor." And when we saw it, those few of us huddled in that hospital, it awoke a deep longing in every last one of us, something like a "yearning for the vast endlessness of the sea."
 - For Jesus, spiritual formation was not merely a set of individualized practices, but the living embodiment of a social order lost in Eden and restored in Resurrection.
 - So the question I should be asking is: Does my spiritual practice draw me toward the suffering and injured one on the roadside ... toward the tax collector and the sinner ... toward the strangers I might pass by without recognizing them as neighbors?
 - Jesus' goal is not merely the formation of a redeemed individual but of a new community — a family, made up of every tribe, tongue, and nation ... from every walk of life, who are together being formed into people of love, justice, wisdom, and peace to one day rule over the whole earth at his side.
 - Matthew 22 records Jesus telling that parable.
 - If you were to turn back a page or two, in Matthew 20, you'd find Jesus living the themes of the very parable he'd later tell ...
 - Jesus on his way to Jerusalem ... the Triumphal Entry, the Last Supper, the Cross — it's all right around the corner.
 - The crowds are building around Jesus. There's all kinds of excitement: "This is the one! The one we've waited for! He's returning to Jerusalem to set up his throne and reign!"
 - You can almost feel the disciples' backs straightening up and a little pomp in their stride.
 - They're with the King, and following him took them from forgotten fishermen to royal princes.

- But here at Jericho, two blind men are screaming from the roadside, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
- “Sssssshhhhh! Don’t bother the King. He’s making his grand entrance.”
- These blind men are almost certainly at the city gate where the “unclean” were cast outside.
- Likely lying on the roadside or leaned against the wall like vagabonds.
- It’s a real-life Good Samaritan scene, the non-fiction version.
- They just get louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
- Jesus stops. Diverts his path. Allows himself to be interrupted. “Who’s calling me?”
- v34 — “Jesus had compassion (*splanhizomai*) on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.” (Matthew 20:34)
- He had “Good Samaritan” compassion, from the gut compassion, “doubled over, can’t walk by, just have to help” compassion.
- This is one of SO many stories where Jesus' is interrupted ... in fact, the ministry of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is largely one of responding to unexpected interruptions with divine compassion.

Intentional and interruptible:

- This is one of SO many stories where Jesus' is interrupted ... in fact, the ministry of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, is largely one of responding to unexpected interruptions with divine compassion.
- A life of apprenticeship to Jesus typically begins with growing more intentional (like Jesus), but that intention is meant to free us to become more interruptible (like Jesus).
- I learn the practices of ordering my life by the intentional *way of Jesus* ... all so I can be freed to become a living picture of the interruptible *love of Jesus*. Making myself more and more available to serve God’s purposes in my everyday life.
- To return to where we began this entire practice, one of the best ways to take your spiritual temperature is: to look at your automatic responses to life.
- You can think of apprenticeship to Jesus as intentionally training to become the kind of person who, when you are pressured by life, when the unplanned and unexpected come your way, *you increasingly respond and react to life the way Jesus would respond and react if he were in your shoes.*

- Bobby, the night shift hospital custodian ...
- Bobby, the apprentice of Jesus of Nazareth — in an intentional and interruptible way — served the needs of strangers until they became neighbors.
- The only reason I know that story about my Uncle is because: My Dad was in attendance that night at Bobby’s humble hospital memorial, and that raspy voice from the back wall was a voice that transformed him, a voice he’ll never forget.
 - Because he got off at that same exit to go to work.
 - He saw that same group of men huddled under that same overpass every morning.
 - And he had never stopped.
 - He had seen the need ... and passed by on the other side.
 - And he’d done all of this as an apprentice of Jesus with daily rhythms of Scripture reading and prayer ... weekly practices of Community and Sabbath.
- He was *intentional* but not *interruptible*.
- Was, not is, because when he saw that in Bobby: The from-the-gut compassionate interruptibility of Jesus incarnated in an otherwise ordinary person — he yearned for the endless vastness of the sea and began to build a ship — an available life that didn’t sacrifice intentionality but complimented it with interruptibility.
- Let me bring this a little closer and more personal: Recently on a weekday morning, I walked outside to the sacred seat on my porch with a cup of coffee in hand, lit a candle representing God’s presence, opened my hands in contemplative silence and prayed, “Come Holy Spirit.”
- This is my daily practice of prayer ...
- That’s when I heard it: Not the Spirit’s gentle whisper, but my 2-year-old’s cry ... an hour early.
- And he wasn’t stopping.
- So riddle me this: What is prayer?
 - Is it holding the contemplative silence I honor each morning?
 - Or is it serving my wife by being the one to go into the room to pick my early-rising little one up out of his crib?
- Is prayer the daily *intentional* practice?

- Or is prayer attuning to God by delighting in my son, this little bundle of *interruption*?
- It's *both*, right? Of course it's both. Both are ways of communing with God.
- So how do I know which is right for this moment?
- Well, the truth is, for me, at this particular stage in my apprenticeship to Jesus: My intentional spiritual practice has outrun — by a pretty large margin — my interruptible spiritual practice.
- So that's how I know: The practice that I need this morning, even more than the sacred stillness, is the practice of free interruptibility in service to another.
- And maybe, hopefully, as I attune to God in small interruptions (like little Amos' cry), I'll grow in perception of larger interruptions (like Uncle Bobby's neighboring).

Close:

- I leave you with the simple, profound words of Mother Teresa:
- “God loves us, and we have the opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love.” (Mother Teresa)
- The Modern Church has a bias toward grand stories — stories of great adventure, great risk, great sacrifice.
 - Big, noisy worship gatherings
 - Measurable social change
 - Unexplainable miracles.
 - Impact! In every variety. success is publicly celebrated even within our doors.
- And those are good stories — ones that should be told and should be honored.
- But what if Jesus was serious when he told us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? That heaven invades earth in the small, hidden ways you and I live the way of Jesus' Kingdom in the ordinary world?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The parent, so tempted to multi-task, patiently serves her child with undivided attention?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The executive learns the name and story of a person at the bottom of the org chart

and takes an interest in them?

- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - The business-woman makes decisions in line with Jesus' economy instead of stuffing her own pockets?
 - When the mother of teenagers serves her adolescent kids with the love of Jesus today in spite of yesterday because if his mercies are new every morning, so are hers?
 - When the young, successful 20-something mentors a fatherless boy through a local organization, refusing to race his colleagues up the ladder, spending his life freely on another who can never repay him?
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
- Bobby pulls to the side of the road, walks back down the highway ramp, and says, "Hey guys, you must be cold ..."
- And that's the beginning of a story that will ripple far beyond his days, far beyond his life.
- A story that, if he told it, would surely include that what began as an attempt to offer life to another became the discovery of true life for him — the giver!
- The sort of life so full and so true it can only be received by giving the one I have away.
- The sort of life so full and so true it outlives even death.
- What if the Kingdom comes when ...
 - Ordinary people actively love others like Jesus by service ... not big things, just small things, done with great love.

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 16v27-28, 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?"