

How's your Serve? Six Practices That Grow Faith

Matthew 25:31-46

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In the early dark morning hours of a day in the 1800's in Emmenthal, Switzerland, an old man and woman awoke with a start. Life had been hard for them, as anabaptists, and sleep sometimes was hard to come by due to the hard time they were given for following their convictions that got them in trouble with the government and the government-sponsored church. They had learned to sleep with one eye open.

They lay there a moment longer, trying to figure out what had awakened them. Suddenly, the old man sat up. "Someone is on the roof!", the old man said to his wife. He got up, crept out the door of their modest house and slipped out into the cold darkness. He soon made out the shapes of three young men at work tearing off the thatch of his house roof. Bundles of thatch were falling to the ground as they dug and tore away at his nicely laid thatch roof that he had worked so hard to position just right.

The anabaptists of this time were no strangers to vandalism. Often it was overlooked by their neighbors, and even the descriptive word anabaptist was a negative label and was often spoken through clenched teeth about these re-baptizers who didn't comply with the powerful state-run church's demands to baptize their infants and to serve in the armed forces. They were all about peace and loving their enemies. "We'll see how loving this old couple are when we destroy their roof", perhaps these young men thought as they dug away at his roof.

What should he do? Should he yell and try to surprise them and scare them off? Summoning the law enforcement would probably not be helpful, nor would it fit his conviction to respond with love to those who threaten you with harm no matter the cost. Should he sit passively by why they destroyed his roof? He took a deep breath, prayed "O God, help me to respond like your son Jesus would". Suddenly he knew what he needed to do. It would be risky, but it seemed like the thing to do.

He stepped silently back into the house. "Mom, (he called his wife mom, kinda like my grandpa used to call my grandma mom) it seems we have some workers on our roof. Let's make breakfast", he said to his wife. Well, she, being just as quick-witted as he was, had already figured out what was going on and needed no explanation, and they scurried about stoking up the wood fired stove that also heated their home, and a few minutes later they had bacon and eggs crackling in a cast iron skillet, and water heating up for coffee. They waited a moment longer to give the smell of that bacon time to waft up through what remained of their thatch roof to the young men who were destroying it, and then he stepped back out into the darkness.

“Good morning, young men” he called calmly. “You have been working hard up there. Surely you are hungry for some breakfast. Now come on in and eat” he said firmly. “Mom and I got bacon and eggs ready, and the coffee is just about done.”

They stopped and looked at each other, awkwardly, and slowly climbed down. They may have been drinking at the local pub, but the cool night air had sobered them up a little. They hesitated, but the old man persisted. “Come on in”! We’ve got just enough space at the table. Cup of coffee? Let’s put on a few more strips of bacon, mum, these guys have been working hard and they look hungry.”

And the old man in a calm and kind voice prayed earnestly for his hard-working guests, his family, and thanked God for the food and for the day that God had given them. The young men ate, gulped down their coffee, mumbled something and headed out the door. A moment later they heard noises back on the roof, but this time, there was one still on the ground, handing up the bundles of thatch that had been thrown down. The young men finished repairing the roof and headed on their way. The old couple were not bothered by anyone again thereafter.

There are lots of things that can be emphasized from this story that is recorded in the collection of classic anabaptist stories book titled “Coals of Fire”, first published in 1954 by Elizabeth Hershberger Bauman. We could emphasize the nonviolent response to evil. We could point out the radical trust it would have taken to not sit passively by, but to confront evil not with an impulse to fight, flight, or freeze, but to creatively risk confronting with love—not knowing how things were going to turn out.

But what I want to pull out from this story today is simply the impulse to serve. That’s right, serve. On our pathway of exploration of the 6 practices that grow faith, we’ve encountered signs for talk, pray, celebrate. And today, our practice is, SERVE.

There are lots of ways the word serve is used. To get us thinking about one way serve is used, I asked Bella and Delaney to come up so I can ask them some questions about their volleyball serve!

Interview Questions:

*Is every one of your serves pretty much the same?*

*What do you look for across the net when you are deciding where to place the serve?*

*Has your serve improved over time?*

*What made it improve?*

So that is one way the word serve is used, in sports. Without a good serve, it would be pretty hard to win a game.

What about the word “serve” in regards to walking in faith in Jesus Christ?

Let’s take a look at our passage from Matthew 25 that is suggested in our Leader resource for today—and that Travis read for us to see what we can learn about the serving. The passage begins with Jesus portraying himself as a king on a majestic throne surrounded by angels. And all the nations that he is supreme ruler over are all gathered before him. The king is dividing the nations and people into categories of sheep vs goats. Sheep, who serve those in need and receive the kingdom of God and eternal life, and goats who do not do acts of service and do not receive the kingdom of God and eternal life.

So Jesus, sitting on a throne, waving his sepulcher and dividing the nations. That doesn’t fit so well with the Jesus we read about elsewhere, does it?

Jesus is usually about the work of healing and love and care for those with disabilities, foreigners, those who are despised for their occupation. Those who are at a disadvantage due to their financial status, their nationality, their gender, those who are at the edge of the outside. He confronts those who judge others and think of themselves as superior over others.

Yet here he is, describing himself as seated on the ultimate throne, sorting people into categories of sheep vs goats. If you are like me you don’t care for this image very much.

And it is almost as if Jesus himself doesn’t fancy it either! Because half a sentence later he’s talking about the king being “as a shepherd, separating the sheep from the goats” V32. The king does not sit off in a distance throne, but is out mingling among the sheep and goats, walking where they walk, stepping in what sheep and goats step in!

That sounds more like Jesus, doesn’t it. Yet, he divides those sheep and goats. Sheep on one side, goats on another. And invites the sheep to “Come, receive the kingdom of God!” When I was hungry, you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was without clothes, you gave me some. When I was sick you took care of me. When I was in prison, you visited me.”

And those who are deemed righteous say, “What? When did we see *you* needing all these things and serve *you*? You just showed us you are an almighty king! Kings have everything at their disposal! We just served ordinary people just like us!” And the king/shepherd replies essentially, “yes, precisely. You served me, not to try to score brownie points, but your serve was with genuine care and love. Whenever you served even one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you were serving me. I’m

not a king like other kings, that lord their power over you and demand your allegiance. Come, receive your reward you already have, the kingdom of God and life eternal”

The opposite then is the fate of those who refused to serve others, but served only themselves or those who may reward them. They are missing out on the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love and life!

I still have a hard time with these words though, honestly. I think it's because it seems to divide people into all good or all bad, all sheep or all goat. And Jesus knows better than that. “I am the good shepherd”, he had said elsewhere. “I know my sheep”. And if he knows his sheep, he knows that we are all over the place when it comes to our serve. We serve sometimes with joy and delight, with pure motives that help us see real people with real needs, and other times our serve may be more about meeting a commitment we made at church so that we can maintain our positive status among our peers and family and fellow church members. In the span of 10 minutes, if you are like me, I may have several pure motives, and several ego-inspired motives.

So what is Jesus getting at here? Maybe in this passage what Jesus wants us to know is simply this: In the end, what really matters in what constitutes a well-lived, rewarding and rewarded life is—do we SERVE or not!

I think this can be a bit jarring to us Mennonites who hold pretty tightly to our distinguishing theology of loving our enemies and non-violence. I think maybe we'd like to think that in the final analysis of the universe of what constitutes a life well-lived, how we respond to our enemies is the pivotal factor. We have a theology built around love of enemies. And it's a good one! Some deep thinkers and activists in other denominations are beginning to realize that this high bar set by the peace churches might be what's missing and has allowed their denominations to slip headlong into Christian nationalism and has put such limits on their christian witness!

But Jesus here, speaking of the grand analysis, makes no mention of enemies or violence or peacemaking. Jesus here simply says, in the final analysis, do you serve me by lovingly serving others, or not?

Maybe the old man and woman in 18th century Emmenthal Switzerland got it right, not just on the non-violence part, but in their serve. Maybe the bigger lesson in that story is that the old man and his wife see those young men. And they see them not as enemies, but as people with needs for love and kindness and acceptance—and physical needs—just like all the rest of us. Come, have some breakfast. Let me serve you. The two of them take steps to humanize them within themselves by seeing and serving them, creating a space for those three guys to stop dehumanizing the two of them. Their serve was almost a reflex.

So, how's your serve? Does it need a little practice? Has it gotten a little rusty and squeaky? Does your serve need a little oil and grease to get it moving easily again? Like a combine and header that have a surface rust from sitting since the last harvest, perhaps we need some grain moving through us to get shined up again! Maybe what once was inspiring and pure become a little bit more like an obligation to fulfill a commitment?

Hey kids, and young people. I know you may not want to think about it, but you're soon going back to school. How will you practice your serve? When you get through the lunch line and you are looking for where your friends are sitting in the cafeteria, will you take one more look to see if there is someone sitting off by themselves who you could invite to join you and your friends? "For you were a stranger and you welcomed me."

For others of us, is there a co-worker, a neighbor, a family member who may benefit from your serve in some way. Or some random stranger in need. On Wednesday morning I was out running and got caught in a downpour. I was running south on Anderson Avenue in North Newton through the pounding rain. I had been thinking about this sermon about serving. I thought to myself, wouldn't it be cool if someone was driving by and they stopped to offer me a ride? It would make a great sermon story about how I had been in need of shelter and been served. Ya, several cars drove by but they didn't even slow down. It was fine, I would have refused anyway since I was already soaked to the bone. But I thought to myself, I would love to be that person who would see someone caught in the rain and reflexively offer them a ride.

On the bulletin insert there is a checklist of ways to work on your serve. Now you may have taken a look at that list already and may have thought to yourself: "Didn't I just fill out that gifts inventory thing? Now the church is asking me to commit to something else?"

This is simply some prompts to help you to think about your serve. I know many of you have commitments to serve in some capacity at church, maybe multiple commitments. And that is wonderful. Please keep going with those commitments to serve!

But what I hope to get you to do is get you thinking about and developing your own personal serve. On your own. Not just the commitments you make when you are asked to serve in more orchestrated ways. How will you keep developing a reflexive posture of serving? I invite you to scan the list and mark something. And bring it up and tape it on the wall during our closing song. Kids, bring up your coloring page with something marked on your list too. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, single adults, youth—bring 'em on up while we sing our closing song. There are a few rolls of painter's tape here. Tape them anywhere on this South half of the wall. You are simply setting your intention to work on your serve.

Come on up, folks! Really. You can't work on your serve while you are sitting down! Don't worry about if we'll run out of song, Jason and Kyle will think of something to keep going. This is the closest thing to an altar call you will likely get from us pastors, so here's your chance to take action to work on your serve!