

HOW WILL YOU MEASURE YOUR LIFE:

By who and how you serve

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CLLC

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Stewardship 2

Luke 10:25-37

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was growing up, there was a doorframe in our kitchen where our parents marked our growth. Maybe you had one of those, too. Every year, around Christmas, mom would line us up and mark our height using our initials. For the longest time, it was just Cheryl and me, but then our four brothers came along, and that doorframe became a mishmash of initials and dates. It was a crude yet fascinating piece of history for our family for forty years, and then it was all erased when my dad died and we sold that house.

When our own children came along, we tried to do this, but we moved so many times, we never got more than about three or four years before we left those marks behind. So when our first grandchild was born, Marsha found this: a six-foot classroom ruler, wide enough for all of our grandkids. And for the past twelve years we've been measuring their lives from the day they were born.

It's an interesting notion, isn't it: that we would measure a person simply by their height – because it doesn't tell the whole story. This yardstick cannot measure the size of Gordie's heart, or Sonja's sense of humor. This is not an apt depiction of the bright eyes and laughter of Rory and Felix. And in six weeks, there will be another set of initials of a baby we don't even know yet. Height is a woefully incomplete picture of who these living, breathing treasures actually are.

So how *do* we measure a life? Last week, I began a three-week sermon series entitled: **HOW WILL YOU MEASURE YOUR LIFE?** I suggested that one way our lives can be quantified is by “who and how we love.” All Saints Day was a perfect day to do that, because the memories of our loved ones were richly present. This week, I want to suggest that another way we gauge the core of our lives is by “who and how we serve.” In other words, how do we use the gifts and abilities God has given us to touch the lives of others?

Because, you see, all of this is stewardship; all of this is about being caretakers of God's rich blessings. Like the yardstick, a three-week series is woefully inadequate to measure our whole lives. But I hope this will be a month of teachable moments as we consider how we quantify the values and the purpose of our lives. Okay? Okay!

Two years ago, I led an adult bible study on this well-known text that we have come to know as “The Good Samaritan.” I remember that Wednesday morning, standing before about sixty people, extolling the virtue of this mixed-race and maligned Samaritan who went out of his way to help another person in need. “Isn’t this how we should all live our lives?” I asked in my closing prayer. “By serving our neighbor, whomever they are?”

And because I had about six other meetings that day, immediately after the study, I headed on my way, but first I decided to grab a quick hamburger at the McDonald’s in Roseville. When I walked in, I saw this scraggly, unkempt man sitting alone in a booth, sipping his coffee. The only empty seat that noon was right behind him, so when I ate my lunch, I overheard him ask a guy near him if he could give him a ride to Target. “No,” was the answer that quickly came. Next, he asked another guy, getting up to leave, if he would give him a ride to Target, but the man explained that the cab of his pickup truck was filled with stuff and there was no room. He called over his shoulder to two women sitting across the aisle, “Will you drive me to Target?” “Oh, we’re not planning to leave McDonald’s for an hour or more,” they said.

And then I began to pray for the man. But here was my prayer: “Lord, please don’t let the man ask *me* to take him to Target. I’m in a hurry, and he’s drunk, and I don’t want to get involved, so please Lord, don’t let him ask . . .” And my prayer was interrupted by a voice; “Hey brother,” the voice said, “can you give me a ride to Target?” “Umm, yes, I could do that.”

As he arose, he was so unsteady on his feet that I offered my arm, and as we went through the first set of doors, he fell flat on his face. The McDonald’s staff rushed over as the man spewed a string of four-letter words. One of the kids from McDonald’s suggested that he sit back down and have another cup of coffee. “Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I said, and I walked out to my car and I was going to drive away. But I couldn’t drive away. So I went back in and helped him into my car and we drove toward Target.

“You a doctor or a lawyer or something?” he asked. No, I’m not one of those, I said, rather sheepishly. He told me his name was Andy, and he used to drive a garbage truck, but he broke his knee cap and he couldn’t drive, and he couldn’t afford a doctor, so it self-healed, but he was in constant pain. He asked me if I had any money to give to him, and I happened to have \$5 bill in my pocket so I gave him that. Again, with a string of four-letter words, he said that he didn’t have nothin’, he didn’t have a blanking thing, and blanking this, and blanking that. “And now,” he said, “I’ve left my blanking gloves at McDonald’s.” This is why I didn’t want to get involved! So I handed him my gloves... brand new leather gloves I had just gotten for Christmas.

When we got to Target, I helped him out of the car and his own gloves fell from his lap to the pavement. “Hey Andy, you didn’t lose your gloves; look, they’re right here.” And he said, “Okay, you take those and I’ll keep yours!” But I said, “You know, yours are all broken for your hands, so let’s just keep our own, okay?”

When we got inside, he sat on a bench and I shook his hand and said, “God bless you, Andy.” And he responded, “He already has, brother. He already has.”

I don’t tell you that story to lift myself up; good grief, I tried twice to avoid Andy altogether. I tell you that story for the same reason Jesus told his parable: to remind us of others; all around us there are others who have needs that we can fill. And what if the Andy’s in our midst are really Jesus in disguise? That’s what I want you to consider today.

In that gospel text, Jesus is approached by a young lawyer who is wondering how to get into the Kingdom of God. What do I have to do, the man asked Jesus? “What does your bible say?” Jesus replies. And the young man responds, “Oh, that’s easy-peasy; ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“Good answer!” Jesus said, “Do that and you’ll be fine.”

But the young man is not yet finished with Jesus. “And just who is my neighbor?” he asks, with a slight attitude in his voice, as if to say; “Is it just the family next door, or does it include my backyard neighbor too? And how about the family across the street...and the family at the end of the block? Are my neighbors just the Jewish ones, or do I have to like the Gentiles as well? And must I even care about the Norwegians and Swedes and Tanzanians too? I mean, how far does this ‘neighbor thing’ go? And Jesus said to the man “Let me tell you a story...”

A man was traveling alone from Jerusalem to Jericho, a dangerous road to be sure, and a group of bandits beat him and robbed him and left him for dead. Lucky for him, there came a priest – or maybe it was a Lutheran pastor - who was on his way home from his job at the temple. Surely he would help the victim. But apparently the priest was weary, or his mind was filled with so many details and concerns, that he didn’t even notice the man. In fact, he walked right on by. Ah, but then came along a Levite – or maybe it was the youth director. But when she saw the victim, she didn’t just pass by; she went across the street and passed by. Maybe she was concerned about getting beat up herself.

But then a Samaritan came along. A religious and ethnic half-breed; in fact, a bitter enemy of this Jew who was dying on the road; Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans returned the favor. Yeah right; like he's gonna help! But he does help! He bandages the man's wounds, gives him food and drink, and takes him to a road house and leaves him in the care of another, promising to stop back in a day or two, to pay for the man's care.

A Samaritan did this! And the name of the man he rescued on road was Andy. Or maybe his name was Jesus, but for sure his name was **neighbor**.

As we focus on this thing called "stewardship" we often think that's it's all just about money. But stewardship is also about our talents and our time. And here's the thing; we don't all have the same amount of money to share, and we don't have the same skills or talents or abilities. But we all have the same amount of time. Everyone on the planet has 24 hours in their day, so not having time to help a neighbor is just an excuse, because we have a choice when we wake up in the morning how we will spend our day. The Good Samaritan didn't wake up that particular morning and say, "God, let me help a needy Jew today!" But when that stranger appeared, lying on the side of the road, that's exactly what he did.

Albert Schweitzer was a brilliant musician, physician and theologian in the early 1900's, who left behind professional careers in each of those fields, in order to open a leper colony in Africa. So it is no surprise that Schweitzer would say this: **"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know; the only ones among you who will be really truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."**

Can that be right? That the way to find joy and happiness in this life is not to *seek* joy and happiness, but to serve others in need? Can it be that the healthiest route to recovering from our own wounded spirits and broken hearts could be by giving ourselves away? I think so. I think so.

Last week we began a three-week focus on generosity, and it is centered upon a singular question: ***How will you measure your life?*** Do you find your meaning by the sum of your possessions, or the size of your home, or the significance of your title, or is there a better way? Last week, I suggested that one gauge we might use is, ***By Who and How we Love.***

Today, I would broaden that measurement to include ***By Who and How we Serve.*** But if we only serve our family, or the neighbor next door, that seems pretty narrow. If we only volunteer at the arena because our kids play hockey there, is that what Jesus had in mind? When our only gifts to charity are given to the organizations that serve us, I think is self-serving, and it misses the mark. But when our neighbor cannot pay us back for the help

we offer, or when our neighbor lives at a distance; when he or she is someone we've never even met, or that we may never see again, that becomes the answer to the question that the young lawyer asked Jesus. And when we go out to serve our neighbor today, his or her name might just be Andy, or Abraham, or Jesus. And serving a person like that could change your life.

I'll close with the words of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, who was once asked a question similar to the one the lawyer asked Jesus. Wesley was asked, "Dr. Wesley, how often should I serve, or how much should I give?" And he replied,

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.*

That's how we serve a neighbor. That's how we grow a church. That's how we change the world. May it be so for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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