

## “Whoever Serves”

*Depths of Love – part #5, from umcsdiscipleship.org*

John 12:20-33

**[1 - title slide]** *Welcome, Prayer*

**[2 – flowers in a bucket]** I’d like to start today with this question: What would you say has been the most fulfilling moment of your life so far? If there was a day you could live over again, what would it be? *(Allow time for answers.)*

I figure some people in the room might say their wedding or the day their first child was born. Others might talk about vacations, graduation, getting their first job. I wonder, how many of those experiences involved serving others? How many of those events built relationships and benefitted the kingdom of God?

When I think back on the most meaningful events on my life, they were usually when I served others. Mission trips to St. Croix, Germany, and Appalachia. Youth group raking events and pancake breakfasts. Vacation Bible Schools. Even simple things like helping a sick friend, visiting a family during a funeral, and serving communion at the Bluffs. There is something about investing in others that always lifts me up, no matter what mood I was in.

**[3 – which Golden Rule]** The Bible tells us the importance of serving others first. Jesus spoke of the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” (See Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12) Actually, Socrates was quoted before Jesus as saying, “Do not do to others that which would anger you if others did it to you.” But for Christians, the Golden Rule is always expressed in the imperative sense. We initiate the service, not just react. “Do to others.” Or better said, “Do for others.”

**[4 - John 12:36]** This passage in John 12 is a rather bumpy narrative, sort of rambling about as Jesus gets to his main point about his purpose and glory. In the center is this statement: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will also be.” (John 12:26) To find out how it all connects, let’s step back to the beginning.

The gospel of John tells us that Greek worshippers come to the temple at the same time as Jesus and his disciples. They want a private moment with Jesus, presumably to meet him and ask him some questions. I am intrigued that they

first go to Philip the disciple, instead of Jesus directly. The Bible doesn't tell us much about Philip, but it does say that Philip was the one who brought Nathanael to Jesus. Philip was known for bringing others to Christ.

**[5 – scripture and Palm Sunday]** Instead of a private conversation, though, Jesus takes this moment to teach the crowd about his purpose and mission. In response to Philip's news, Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:23) If you are looking into your Bibles, you might notice that this passage comes immediately after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, in what we now call Palm Sunday. Things are ramping up, coming to a point of no return. This is Jesus' moment now.

**[6 – scripture, crosses]** With the whole world watching and listening, he says, “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” (John 12:25-26) Jesus is teaching about true service, about giving up our own ambitions and selfishness, rejecting what the world offers, and instead focusing on what God offers.

Again, the gospel John offers us two contrasting images: either choose the world or choose Christ. Maybe life is not always that clear-cut, but one thing I can say, if you choose to follow Jesus, you have to be all in. You can't choose to get ahead in this world, seek after wealth, fame, and instant gratification, and expect Jesus to be pleased.

Jesus gave himself as the ultimate example of service and love. He says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” (12:32) He says, “Father, glorify your name!” (12:28). And the gospel author notes, Jesus said this to indicate what kind of death he would face – crucifixion – in order to save the world.

**[7 - burning house rescue]** What would you do to save someone you love? Would you step in and rescue them from a burning building? Sure. I would, too. Would you give them clothing, food, and shelter to save their lives? Of course. However, would you do that for your worst enemy? For a complete stranger?

Jesus doesn't give us the choice. If we love him and follow him, we have to serve him, and that means kindness even to those it is not our first reaction to serve.

**[8 – scriptures]** There are several other scriptures that drive this point home, that actually make it easier for us to choose service and humility. For instance, in the Matthew 5:44-45, Jesus commands, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” In Matthew 25:40, Jesus uses a parable to explain, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” When we see Jesus in all people, when we see our Lord and Master and Savior in the face of those who need our help, no matter who and where they are, it becomes imperative that we act.

**[9 – suitcase]** There is something else I note from John 12:26. Read it again. “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” A lot of times, it seems we in the church are saying, “We need to take Jesus to others who don't know him.” I affirm this, but notice that Jesus says, “...follow me...where I am...” The order matters. Jesus is already out in the world, already in those places where he wants us to go. It's not like we are packing a suitcase with Jesus in it. “Oh, Honey, don't forget my toiletries, and put Jesus in the outside pocket of my travel bag so I can get him out quickly at security.” No! Jesus is divine, omnipresent, everywhere. We are the ones who go, who travel, who minister in Jesus' name. If you are asking me, “Where is Jesus, so I can find him and serve him?” I'll answer, “Wherever it is you see the greatest need, he's already there. Go to him.”

Maybe that's why those Greek worshippers didn't actually need to see Jesus, even though they wanted to. Maybe in an illustrative sense, by seeing Jesus' disciples, they had seen Jesus himself. It's just that no one told them.

**[10 – crowd]** Friends, is there a place Jesus is calling you, where he's already there, ready to receive you, ready to receive your service? We face a world with plenty of challenges: tribalism, disunity, war, poverty, famine. People, generally, are not being drawn together. They are being torn apart.

Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32) Friends, Jesus has already been lifted up. He was lifted

up on the cross. He was lifted up, alive, out of the grave. He was lifted up at the ascension. He has glorified his heavenly Father’s name by completing the purpose he came for, to die for our sins, for our forgiveness, to bring us to himself. When we serve others in Jesus’ name, whether on a mission trip or simply by helping a neighbor, we are allowing Jesus to draw the world back together as he promised he would.

**[11 – Jesus, sky, cross]** People need to see us serve, and when they do, they will hear God’s voice, through our witness. In this scripture passage, the voice of God speaks from heaven, saying, “I have glorified my name and will glorify it again.” (John 12:28) The people couldn’t decide if it was thunder or an angel, but Jesus clarifies: “That was my heavenly Father, and he said that for your benefit, not mine.” (John 12:30) Those people in the temple needed to hear God’s voice. So do people in our world today, and when we follow Jesus and obey what he commands, God’s voice goes with us.

**[12 – seeds, scripture]** At the beginning of this passage, Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24) I read those lines frequently at graveside services. For a brief moment, I want you to imagine watching your own funeral. What would you want people to say about you? Would you want them to say you had a nice house, a nice car, a nice dog? Or would they say, you were a good friend. You were generous. You loved the Lord and you showed it in how you treated and loved others.

How do you live today so that their testimonies will be true?

I want people to remember that I tried to serve God in all that I did. I am proud to be an elder in the United Methodist Church. Our purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation the world. If that is also your goal, you are in the right place and can be a part of the ministry of the Church.

**[13 – UMC ministries, plate]** Many of you probably don’t know, but a portion of our giving every Sunday is set aside for mission, through something called Ministry Shares. It’s the first and foremost act of mission and generosity every United Methodist Church participates in. All the UMCs in Michigan give about \$14 million each year in Ministry Shares. They are called Ministry Shares

“because we share some of the gifts with which God has blessed us. Together we support the work of the Church in...a wide range of ministry and mission.”

About 70% of those gifts are used in Michigan for the work of the UMC, including Conference Benevolences and Clergy Support. The other 30% of those gifts support something called General Church Apportionments, funds for worldwide mission. That includes the World Service Fund, which supports world outreach for providing food, water, shelter, and response to injustice. There are a slew of other missions we support as United Methodists, and you can read about them online. ([www.umc.org/en/how-we-serve/umcgiving](http://www.umc.org/en/how-we-serve/umcgiving))

Every dollar we put in the offering plate goes to serve someone, whether directly here at Grace UMC, or throughout the state and the world.

**[14 - title slide]** Service is mission. It’s being generous with your time and your resources. Karl Vaters said, “It’s possible to give without being generous, but no one can be generous without giving.” When you serve someone in Jesus’ name, when you serve the Church Jesus “built on the rock,” it’s going to cost you. I’m not going to sugarcoat it. It will cost you time, effort, energy, and resources. Being a follower of Jesus is not for the faint of heart. Yet I can honestly tell you, I have never regretted following Jesus and giving my time and money to his church. God has shown me more miracles and blessings over the years than I can count. I have been in places where God has moved powerfully. That is because I followed him to the places where he already was.

Friends, I challenge you to serve Jesus. Go to him. Ask him where are the places that burn in your heart for peace, grace, and justice. Find a way to serve and bless the church, the community, and the world. Listen intently for God’s voice, and I promise you, you will find the Holy Spirit speaking to you when you serve and give to others.

Let’s pray.

**Memory Verse:** John 12:26 (NIV)

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

**Reflection Questions:**

1. What has been the most memorable day or event in your life so far? What made it memorable? Whom were you with?
2. What ways have you spent time serving others? How did those experiences feel? What made them special?
3. Reflect on this verse: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24) What things are you willing to give up so that your life can produce fruit for God?
4. What would people say about you at your funeral? Would you want them to say you served them? Do you live that way now so they will?
5. Jesus was lifted up on the cross to save all of us. Have you thanked him for that?
6. Name one way you can serve someone else in Jesus’ name this week. Commit to doing it, and tell someone else what you’ll do.