

# IMPROVE YOUR SERVE

Living With a Heart More Like His

Text: John 1:1,14; Philippians 2:1-11

## Introduction

We began last week a series of reflections on what it really looks like to SERVE the NEEDS that are all around us in the way that Jesus did. I suggested that there are some crucial differences between Jesus' mode of servanthood and the way that some people (maybe even you and I) slip into "serving" others. If you didn't get them all, you can find the message on our website and out on our literature racks. Just look under the SERVE NEEDS series.

Today, I want to think with you about the kind of HEART we need in order to practice habitually the kind of servanthood described in the left column. We're going to consider together what the Bible teaches about this in John chapter one and Philippians chapter 2, but the Big Idea is this: The habit of truly Christlike service flows only from a humble heart.

One of the most servant-hearted people I know is my step-mother, Patty Ann. At one time, she was one of the top twenty women's tennis professionals on earth. Today she is my father's permanent doubles partner and a fabulous teaching pro. The high school kids she coaches just love her, because she is so good at bringing out the best in them. Patty Ann would tell you that if you want to improve your serve on the tennis court, you need a flexible body. All the power in your serve flows from that flexibility – the bend in your knees, the arc of your back, the easy crook in your arm, the flick of your wrist.

What I want to say to you today is that if you want to improve your serve in all the arenas of your life – if you want your service to be more like Jesus -- then you need a humbly flexible heart. You need a heart that is willing to bend and arc and reach and follow through in the way that Jesus did. Think about this with me today.

## In the Beginning

Before there were vast black holes sucking matter into the abyss of interstellar space... Before there were stardust and subatomic particles forming matter and energy itself... Before there was light or darkness, time or space... breath or belief... there was only God. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, this God was and is "infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute... infinite, infallible, independent... not standing in need of any creatures... but only manifesting His own glory."

Although it remains an impenetrable mystery to the human mind, the Bible teaches that God existed and still exists as "three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity." The Church has called Him, "God the Creator, God the Word, and God the Spirit." It is probably impossible for us to understand what life is like within this Trinity. Our lives are marked with so much conflict, confusion, and restlessness that we can hardly begin to conceive of the absolute communion, contentment, and joy within the life of God Himself.

Suffice it to say that if we were to taste it for even a nanosecond it would be the most rapturous reality we'd ever known. Think of chills of ecstasy running up and down the length of your body for all of eternity. Imagine all wisdom and all beauty and all love suddenly and simultaneously filling your being, becoming your being, in wave after wave of circuit-sweeping shudders. Now realize that if you were to experience that for 10,000 years you still wouldn't know a billionth of the glory of actually being God for a single instant.

Absolute communion. Utter contentment. Endless joy. This is something of the majesty and the mystery the Apostle John is trying to communicate when he says: **"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God"** (John 1:1).

## And the Word Became Flesh

It is only when we touch at least the hem of that glory that we can begin to understand the serving heart of God. Because, you see, what follows next is more amazing still. Eugene Peterson famously translates John's account of the Incarnation as follows: **"And the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into our neighborhood"** (John 1:14a). Now, I don't know about your neighborhood, but mine – as lovely as it is – isn't one of absolute communion, complete contentment, and endless joy. As I've shared with you before, the problem is the neighbors.

There's the lady whose driveway I've shoveled out, I don't know how many times, and who never bothers to thank me. There's the man whose politics run contrary to mine, and the woman who's too wrapped up in her problems to ask how anyone else is doing. There's the teenager with purple hair and the kid that nearly ran me down on his bicycle on the sidewalk. There's the guy who never seems to pick up his newspaper and runs the snowblower at 5 AM. And for every story I could tell you about them, there's probably another they could tell about me. You see, I'm the guy who disturbs the neighborhood with his newspapers and snowblower!

But I don't usually critique myself that way. Most of the time, I just wish all these others in my neighborhood would live up to my standards. I hold firm to my way of living. I cling tight to my course on the sidewalk. I hug hard to my schedule, hold fast to my opinions, and cleave to the people who are mostly like me. When I am criticized, I clutch my ego. When given a chance to take credit I often grab it. When faced with someone else's need I frequently grip my own resources all the tighter.

I do this because all these things are sacred to me. They give me a measure of stability and security. They are what keep me feeling a little bit superior to certain people, a little more in control, a little bit more godlike, in a sense. When I do manage to fence off a little bit of heaven for myself, when I have the kind of companions with whom I'm comfortable, the sort of environment that I like, I resist leaving that neighborhood. I'm not sure WHAT Eric Herron is thinking, moving from Pasadena!

## God Demonstrated His Flexibility

But the LORD in whose presence we gather this morning is not like me. He doesn't hold on so tight. Philippians 2 says that though He, unlike me, was **"in very nature God"** – the One to whose standards, to whose way of life, everyone ought rightly to seek to live up -- **"He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped."** Instead, He who was higher than the highest high and greater than the greatest great, stooped down, and I mean all the way down. Compared to who He really was and where He'd really come from He **"made himself nothing."** He took off the robes of his divine majesty, bent down, and put on **"the very nature of a servant,"** born to a peasant girl and an ordinary tradesman in the armpit of the ancient world. He stooped to share the life of the least of humanity.

**"And being found in appearance as a man,"** He bowed even lower still. He, before whose glory the purest angels needed to shield their gaze, **"he humbled himself."** He bent to embrace lepers with suppurating sores. He knelt down beside a guilty adulteress about to be executed for her crime and said, "I am for you. Life can become new for you." He stooped down to touch the beggars, the blind and the lame and said, "I will help you." He stooped to wash the stinking feet of fishermen and to pray for the souls of those who hated and hurt Him.

Then He, before whose command worlds and wind and waves moved in instant submission, stooped further yet and **"he became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!"** He bent all the way to the bottom, so that by the disfiguring of His body and the shedding of His blood, we might be straightened out before God, washed clean of our sin, and one day be lifted up to the place from which He'd come. As the Nicene Creed puts it: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God... who for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven."

How Can I Live From a Heart Like His?

And I struggle to see how I could possibly rearrange my important schedule to volunteer at church or go on a short-term mission trip or serve someone in desperate need? I debate whether to bend down from my lofty place and truly listen to someone I find a bit beneath me, or leave the safe circle of my friends to reach out to that stranger? I struggle to discern how I could possibly release my grasp on some of the comforts of my material heaven in order to invest more in the work of the Kingdom? I wonder how I could ever descend from my righteousness to forgive that sinner's offense or stoop to serve alongside that person whose party or preferences seem so unholy to me?

And then I catch a glimpse of Jesus, and I know I need a heart transplant. I start to pray that God will take my heart of stone and give me a heart like his – one that is humble enough to flex in order to serve. How about you?

Dr. Richard Selzer tells of a moment when he caught such a glimpse. The famous surgeon tells this tale in his book, *Mortal Lessons*. "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy; clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor from her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will be." She nods and is silent... Her young husband is in the room... The man smiles," and looks at his wife with a love so generous that the surgeon is stunned into silence. "All at once I know who he is," writes Selzer. "I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with [the divine.] And then, the Bridegroom "bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close, I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers."

Once upon a time, the God who stooped to shape humanity from the dust and breathed life into it, bent down again. This time, it was Himself he reshaped -- to kiss a disfigured Earth with His grace and to breathe new life into this beloved race. Christ showed us that it is not just the staggering height of God's holiness that constitutes His grandeur; it is the stunning depth of his humility, his willingness to bend in service, which truly displays His glory.

**"We saw the glory with our own eyes,"** said the Apostle John about this wonder. We saw **"the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish"** (John 1:14, *The Message*).

What do you say? Let's pray for the heart to go serve like Him.

#### **Benediction**

Long ago, another soul changed by his vision of Christ left these words for us to ponder, and with this charge we'll go forth:

**"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then... have the same kind of love, being one [with Him] in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility... look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.**

**[For our] attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!**

**"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father"** (Phil 2:1-11).