

## ***To serve, not to be served***

**Text: Deuteronomy 10: 12 – 13, Mark 10: 35 - 45**

**Rev. Dr. Terry Schmitt**

**January 20, 2013**

You don't have to listen to me today. How's that for a way to start a sermon? But you don't, really. See, if you got the idea of the children's sharing time -- that we can all be ministers -- then you pretty much can go to sleep now. That's the whole point of why Geordie asked me to preach today -- to share that simple message. We can all serve God in a million different ways, no matter our age, our physical capacity, or anything else about us. All it takes is a willingness to serve. If we have that will -- and I think our children demonstrated that we all do -- then we can effect those miracles that Geordie told us about last week. We can all minister, and we should. That's it. I'm done.

Of course, I do have a bit more to share than just that. Geordie asked me to preach today because I was part of a special church work group this summer about leadership. Carol Lorenzo, Rayda Bouma, Jimmy Quinn and I were asked to look into new and better ways to get people to volunteer for church council and other church ministries. So, what I'm really doing is reporting for our group.

But, really, if you watched the children run out to their loved ones to share a bit of God's grace and love, and you thought to yourself, "Boy, that is kind of neat! I could do that!" -- then you really have absorbed all the important things I wanted to raise up today for our consideration.

So...I guess I'm done. (Can I go now?...) Well, actually, let me tell you a couple stories and then I'll go.

Here's the first story. I led several youth mission trips to New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina. . We went to a place called the West Side Mission, run by Brother Vance Moore. Vance is a real New Orleans character, and he had a way with our kids that got us not only to do great work, but to examine our own lives, too.

He would gather us every day after we had come in from hauling lumber, or clearing debris, or putting up sheet rock. We would be messy, and tired, and smelly, but he would put us in a room, and ask us: "Where did you see God today?" And, after a while, with a bit of hesitation, people would answer him.

One time during this gathering he asked us why we had come to New Orleans. No one spoke up at first, perhaps because people were all feeling a bit smug about volunteering and giving up their winter school break to go do very dirty, hard, taxing work in a poor part of New Orleans. We were probably thinking, "Well, we wanted to be good people and do good things."

And so he kind of shocked us when he said, "I know why you came here. You wanted to feel good about yourselves. That's why you came. You do some work among poor folks whose homes have been destroyed and it makes you feel good about yourself." There was a stunned silence, with a few furtive glances shared between friends that strongly suggested that Vance's observation had hit home. But he went on.

“That’s okay. It’s okay to feel good about yourselves for coming here to serve God. Think about what some of your friends back home are doing right now to try to feel good about themselves. I’d bet it is nothing like this. In fact, I’d bet some of it may be dangerous and self destructive, and, in the end, it won’t make them feel very good at all. But you chose to do something different. You gave up your holiday to come here to help people you don’t know, in ways that make you sweat and get you dirty, and quite apart from the good you are doing for people in this town, you wind up feeling good about yourself. That’s okay. You are serving God. That does make you feel good, and it should. That’s what God wants.” We were a bit shocked, but I also think we learned.

Brother Vance also shared a paraphrase of today’s gospel lesson as a motto for us. Jesus told us, Vance said, that “I came to serve, not to be served.” That was our scripture today, although with slightly different wording. Jesus says, “I came to serve, not to be served.” Vance told us that if we really want to follow Jesus, if we really want to find faith and live faith, then we start with a desire to serve God, not to be served by God.

So here’s what I took away from those talks with Vance, and I am pretty sure our youth did, too: first: following our Lord has to do with being willing to serve. And second: serving feels good. Both of those things. It’s like the crossroads of faith: being willing to serve, and finding deep inner joy because we do. Vance reminded us that if we seek mere pleasure, we probably won’t find any that lasts. And if we come to spirituality wondering what God can do for us, we probably won’t find God at all. But if we come to serve, not to be served, we will find both God and deep self-satisfaction. Put another way, you serve a little and gain a lot.

That works on as small a scale, as our children giving us a hug we didn’t expect; or on as big a scale, as Martin Luther King devoting his life to serving others. The scale isn’t nearly as important as the willingness to serve and the discovery of joy in the serving.

Actually, this sermon is supposed to be a sales job. Remember that group that Carol, Rayda, Jimmy, and I were on? Well, part of our work is that I am supposed to sell everyone here on the idea of serving on a church board, committee, or ministry. The council is concerned that not enough people are signing up to fill the various church committees, ministries, groups, and official organizations. In fact, the annual chore of filling church positions has become just that, an annual chore that no one views with enthusiasm. That is the reason for the group that we, Carol, Rayda, Jimmy, and I were on.

What we were asked to do was to come up with ideas. We didn’t have to implement them. We didn’t even have to believe they would be great ideas. All that mattered was that we think up many ideas for the council to consider so that there would be people available to help do the work of the church. We came up with a lot of ideas, and I hope that many will be put into practice.

But, along the way, we realized that there was one big idea. It is one we all believe, but don’t share enough: each of our church committees does real ministry in God’s name. Big ministry, little ministry, financial ministry, personal ministry -- all sorts of different ways that we serve God and each other -- and everyone, absolutely every one here in this room -- can be a part of those ministries -- just as our children can do ministry.

So, showing up at a Buildings and Grounds meeting to figure out which project

needs to be done in what order may seem mundane, but it is ministry! It serves the church, and actually, the whole town. Who knows how many people drive by our clean and painted steeple and are inspired to share God's love simply by the sight of that glorious structure. Or how many children get a vital boost in life because they have attended the Nursery School? Or how many people are inspired by someone's voice singing in choir, or are touched by a Deacon reaching out to them. Or... well, I could go on and on. Service on the boards that run these operations is ministry, vital ministry. It matters to the church, to the community, and finally, it matters to ourselves, too. It's not just the obvious ones like Parish Care or the Service and Outreach committee that does real ministry in our midst. It's all of them. And all of us -- any one of us -- can help serve.

That was the big idea: that all of the organizational life of our church is about doing ministry. Some of that work may seem small, or tedious at times, or far removed from scripture, but it's not. It is the equivalent, in our adult and responsible kind of way, of the kids giving us a hug. Serving, and being willing to serve, is like us giving a hug to our community and our church. And every single one of us can do some of that.

So the sales job that our committee was assigned to start was to get absolutely everyone willing and interested in the work of the church, because in one way or another, it is all ministry. And the neat truth that Vance taught us that day -- and I think our children mirrored this morning -- is that it is immensely satisfying to do God's work. Do you see the children's faces this morning? Did any of them look unhappy? No, they did ministry and they loved it. So will we.

I'm a bit sorry for all of us who didn't have a child come and hug us this morning, although we all shared in the glow of their enthusiasm. If there had been more children, there would have been more hugs. There's a point in that, too. The more people who take on a role of service in the church -- in other words, the more people who serve and minister -- the more love gets spread around. That's another reason to sign up for a church committee or ministry -- so that more people spread around a bit more love.

So, here's the last part of my sales job: when that time comes to sign up for a committee or a work group here at church, I want you to remember the children today. I want you remember their enthusiasm, their joy, and the love that they spread. They did a real piece of ministry. And if they can do ministry, so can any and all of us. Remember them, because I deeply believe that that joy, that enthusiasm, that encounter with God's love is what is in store for us who are willing to step out and step up to some aspect of the church's business. Remember the children, and remember the joy that comes in serving, not being served.

Amen.

©Rev. Dr. Terry Schmitt

**First Church of Christ Congregational**  
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107  
860.233.9605 [www.whfirstchurch.org](http://www.whfirstchurch.org)