

MESSAGE: “*Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*”

Texts: Matthew 5:13-16; Acts 1:8

Shift #4: From ‘Serve Us’ to Service

Shift: *Helping Congregations Back into the Game of Effective Ministry*, Phil Maynard

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to encourage a shift from *inreach* to *outreach* by awakening the capacity for healing within each life.

Our Human Condition:

It is a gift to feel part of a church family: to grow from roots nourished by God’s love and grace, to be connected to friends with similar values, challenges and hopes, to be part of a team trying to make a difference in a hurting world. Yet sometimes we don’t feel those things. Sometimes we feel like our roots are cut off from God. Sometimes we feel forgotten by friends. Sometimes we feel like our work makes no real difference. In such moments, we are grateful for any who tether us to hope and help us recover.

At the same time, we are also concerned about loved ones, co-workers and others who may be going through hard things without any support, from a faith community or otherwise. We wish we could share with them what we have found, but we don’t know how to go there, or what to say, or what to do.

I believe the seed of healing is found in every single one of us. Every one of us has a story, a witness, which can heal a human soul, perhaps many souls. The witness doesn’t persuade with an evangelistic conversation, theological explanation or Bible teaching. More often than not, it isn’t something we say at all, but rather something we do that shows the world there is a God who cares, who loves, who heals. The seed is within; all we need to do is plant it.

When excavations of Herod the Great’s palace on Masada in Israel commenced, a Judean date palm seed was found that was estimated to be about 2,000 years old. Eleven years ago, the seed was germinated, and it grew and flourished on the Kibbutz of Ketura. They called the Judean Date Palm, ‘Methuselah,’ named after the biblical ancestor who allegedly lived a thousand years. The potential for dates was contained in that seed for two millennia, but they were accessible to no one until it was planted in 2005.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used similar metaphors to communicate this truth. “You are the salt of the earth,” he said, “but if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” Again, he said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine

before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise God in heaven.” As long as the light of the lamp is contained, it helps no one; the light must be released before others can benefit. And the same is true of salt. As long as the salt remains in the shaker, it offers none of its flavor or preservative. Only when sprinkled can it fulfill its purpose.

Think of the church building as a giant saltshaker. We are the salt with great capacity to season the community and world with the distinctive flavor of our witness. As long as we are contained in the saltshaker, we are like that 2,000-year-old seed, unable to give fruit or healing to the world. But imagine the possibilities once we are planted! The garden growth is limitless. In the words of William Carey, a renowned missionary to India, “The future is as bright as the possibilities of God!” All we need to do is get out of the saltshaker and into the world.

All of this brings us to the *shift* that we reflect on today: a shift in perspective from “Serve us” to service. For any who haven’t been with us for the past few Sundays, we have been looking at five shifts in thinking that are identified by Phil Maynard in his book, *Shift: Helping Congregations Back into the Game of Effective Ministry*. The Bible itself points toward these shifts of perspective. The first was a shift from fellowship to hospitality, the second, from ‘worship as an event’ to ‘living the worshipful life,’ the third from membership to discipleship, and the fourth which we reflect on today, from ‘Serve us’ to service.

It is often touted in retail that ‘the customer is always right,’ or that ‘the customer comes first.’ Arthur T. Demoulas, the public face and part owner of the Market Basket chain of supermarkets, challenges this assumption. He says the heart of the company is in its employees. If you treat them right, they, in turn, will treat the customer right, and all will reap the rewards. The insight certainly has worked for him.

If we transfer his idea to the church, it suggests that churches which make ‘taking care of the membership’ their primary focus will never have enough energy or vision to reach a hurting world. If the lion’s share of a pastor’s job description is congregational care, the church’s witness will begin to flounder. I love the work of pastoral care—often it does not feel like work at all—but in any given week, I can offer pastoral care to perhaps 5 to 8 families or people. In a small church that may be ok, although even in that context, neighborhood studies are often formed to multiply the number of folks with whom the pastor may stay connected in a given week.

In a larger church, comprehensive congregational care is impossible for one pastor. If, however, I engage ten to join me in the ministry of congregational care, then together we can perhaps connect each week with 50 persons or families. If I engage 100 to join me in

this vital work, we can perhaps reach 500 persons or families each week! Many will be active members and constituents of the church, but others will not be, allowing the church to grow in outreach and mission.

When Jesus' disciples argued over who was greatest in Christ's kingdom, Jesus reminded them the one who is greatest must be servant to all. He illustrated his assertion by washing his disciples' feet and by releasing his life to the cross. The purpose of the Church is not 'Do your best to keep everyone happy.' The purpose of the Church is, 'Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.' We do this through ministries of service, or, as I like to call it, "hugging the world with hope." Albert Outler, a spiritual giant in Methodist theology, says it well: "The world hears the Gospel when it sees it, when its witnesses are clearly committed to a more fully human future, in this world and the next."

The service we strive for is expressed in two ways: first, through the personal ministry of disciples who generously offer their passions and gifts, and second, through congregational service initiatives that strategically transform the community. One of my passions is facilitating worship opportunities for seniors who cannot make it to church. In every community I live, I find myself leading services of worship at nursing homes and assisted living facilities. It isn't a ministry for everyone, but it is one God has called me to. I am also grateful for times when I can assist at the High Street Food Cupboard ministry. That effort requires the hard work and dedication of many volunteers from more than one church. The combined effort provides a tangible life-line for the most vulnerable among us. In short, it changes the world.

There is a discernible progression to a congregation's adventure of service. At the start, a church may be oblivious to the needs of the world around it. When I was in high school, I was a part of a store-front church that was strong on praise, prayer and Bible study, but it did almost nothing for anyone outside the fellowship. In time, we sensed God tugging at our conscience to do something for the community around us. We knew God expected more and we began to educate ourselves about the needs of our community. We collected special offerings for a number of different projects.

Phil Maynard refers to this stage of the service journey as 'missional gestures.' Missional gestures meet real needs that can make significant difference. The special UMCOR offering that we gathered this morning is an example of a missional gesture. The gifts given will be pooled with thousands of others to provide immediate relief to those in crisis wherever they may be located on the planet. When we participate in missional gestures, though, we do so at arm's length. We do not personally interact with those we are seeking to help.

As churches mature in service, they begin to develop ministries of engagement in addition to missional gestures. These are strategic opportunities for church participants to be a part of the work. Ministry engagement is ‘ministry with’ rather than ‘ministry for.’ It happens at the level of personal friendship, and it changes both the giver and the givee.

During my last year as pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church in Skowhegan, Maine, I participated in a short-term mission trip to Costa Rica. We were given two projects to work on: one was providing assistance to a Spanish-language Vacation Bible School by illustrating the daily stories with wide-mouth puppets, the other was to scrape and paint an enormous concrete wall shared by a local Methodist church and Christian bookstore. There was a second team staying with us at the Mission Compound from South Carolina. Recently divorced, I was questioning whether I should continue in pastoral ministry or not.

On our third day, I was asked to lead the morning worship and offer a devotional. Quite honestly, I wanted to decline, but that would raise questions which I wanted to avoid. I have no memory of what I said or spoke about, but I do remember one of the team members from South Carolina asking to speak with me for counsel. He had participated in mission trips for years with his wife, but after her young death from cancer, no longer went on team. He also stopped attending church because he felt God had let him down. He agreed to help with this mission team only because someone dropped out at the last minute and he knew the team would be compromised without his particular skill represented.

As he talked, I listened. Quite honestly, I said very little, because I was feeling pretty empty inside myself. But as I listened, I heard him verbalize his hurt, confusion and grief over losing both wife and faith. By the time I offered to pray with him to restore his journey with God, I discovered he had healed much of my own hurt, too. He was deeply grateful to me for my spiritual help, but honestly he will never know how grateful I was to him for his. Ministry of engagement heals both helper and helped.

There is one more level to this congregational adventure of service: systemic change—to alter the systems and realities that create the needs that churches and non-profits are trying to address in the first place. Homelessness, for example, which is healed by providing transitional shelter, resources, and the construction of low-income housing to meet the demand. The service miracle grows with expanding witness and the world itself is changed. Do you recall the words of Jesus? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” May it be so!