

"The Serving Church"
Acts 8
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Even though the President of our country (George H.W. Bush) has emphasized the need for a thousand points of light most of us still find "service" to be a duty to perform when we have time. It is an extra in life and sometimes an intrusion. In fact it can become a burden, an obligation.

Pastor Bill Hybels, in a recent book, painted what I think is a humorous word picture of a church's battle to get enough volunteers to serve. "It's August. Throughout the country the same late-summer ritual begins. Pastor Bob has just received his annual flood of resignation notes. SS teachers, ushers, Bible Study leaders, youth workers, burden bearers, and assorted other servers have called it quits. He's not surprised - it happens every year. Some people offer lengthy explanations while others simply say I've done my part. Pastor Bob knows that these ministries can't continue unless someone fills all the empty positions. So with unprecedented determination, he begins psyching up for the annual "August Recruitment Campaign." And while Pastor Bob is psyching himself up to recruit, the congregation is preparing to resist. A man named Jim says to himself, "He's not going to get me this year, so help me. I don't care what he preaches on, or how often he threatens God's judgment. "I'm not going to cave in - even if he starts to cry. "Three years ago he cried and I ended up as a center aisle usher and I don't even like people. This year he won't get me. Now Pastor Bob knows how much resistance there is to service and so this year he's bring out heavy artillery: He's planning a four part series called "Serve or burn." Every week he'll use an illustration from Foxes Book of Martyrs. He will use a lapel mike and walk the length of the stage, raising his voice, perspiring, and wave the Bible. Then on the fourth week he'll bring out his secret weapon: Seven year old Suzy Miller. He'll cradle the little darling on his lap AND ask her what it's like to spend the entire second grade in Sunday School with no teacher. He hopes that she will cry because if she does the war will be won - people won't be able to resist serving. (Honest To God pg. 107-9)

Oh the manipulation might not be quite so blatant but how many of us succumb to service for inauthentic reasons? How many of us decide to get involved because of pressures from outside or from within ourselves.

But once we have agreed to serve - we already regret it. It's just more busyness. We don't really have any passion for it and we have no real purpose.

How many people are serving like that?

In contrast I want you to look with me at Acts 8: 1-4. Remember from chapter 7 Stephen has died - stoned to death Persecution erupted. It was severe; people were taken from homes. The text says the believers were scattered.

Most of us have seen sufficient pictures in recent weeks of the Kurds being scattered because of the retribution against them by the Iraqis. Imagine the Jewish Christians likewise being scattered - running for their lives.

What would you expect the response to be? How would you expect those people to be acting? Look at Verse 4: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" These people, in their running, were "preaching" the word. This word "preaching" is an all-inclusive term to describe people with a witnessing life. They loved people, they served people and they proclaimed the truth about Jesus.

From verse 1 we learn that these people were not the Apostles: "all except the apostles were scattered"

From the context we can also discover that these people are relatively new converts - these are not the experts. These people had not been with Jesus. These people were not the ones who had spent three years learning from him. These are people who have learned of Christ through the witness of others.

Please notice that these people go out from Jerusalem sharing their lives with others - and they do that in spite of the circumstances. This was not a planned mission venture. They did not get to pick the place to which they would go they did their sharing at great risk - no bandwagon.

As I read this account and I think in contrast to how I so often view service - how reluctant I am. Therefore I ask:

Why did these people do it?

Why did they have such passion?

Why did they so willingly risk their lives?

How could they care so, for others, when they were in danger

In the midst of a persecution, of displacement, of life threat these people are excited to love others and proclaim Christ. WHY?

Howard Snyder wrote of today's church with these words: "Many churches do not share the gospel effectively because their (mutual experience as Christians) is too weak and tasteless to be worth sharing. It does not excite the believer to the point where he wants to witness and as the believer suspects it is not at all attractive to the unbeliever."

But something is different here in Acts. These Jewish Christians had experienced JESUS. There was a reality a "realness" about their relationship to Jesus that was contagious. When they turned to Christ - when they heard the good news about Jesus and believed it and responded to it in repentance and faith, God did two things for them:

First, they were forgiven. Most of us here have heard a great deal about this aspect of Christianity: We know that we have sinned against God. And when we come to Christ asking his forgiveness, He does forgive us based on his death for us on the Cross. What we expect, because it is taught in the Bible, is that our sins will no longer be held against us. -And we expect that when we die we will be with God because the "stuff", the sins that blocked our relationship to Him, has been removed. Now that is a fundamental and foundational dimension of Christianity. Without the cross of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins we could not know God.

But unfortunately many people think that is all there is to Christianity. We get forgiven, we get assured of our future in heaven and then what - wait until we die? No. That is only part of the good news:

There is a SECOND thing that God does in conversion to Christianity: He gives us life! Jesus said "I have come that you might have life - life abundant." He said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believe him who sent me, has life - he has crossed over from death to life. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "born again!"

Most of us when we hear "life, everlasting life, or eternal life" think that the Bible is talking about the length of our life - we will live forever. But the truth is that the length of life is not the focus of Jesus' words: Jesus is talking about a quality of life. The length of life is taken for granted if the kind of life is understood. And what kind of life is it that God gives? It is his life - spiritual life. The Bible says that before that life is given to us we are unresponsive to God. We are "dead" in our sins. We don't know God, don't care about God, and can't serve God. But then God gives us His Spirit – life itself. Now we belong to God, We care about God, and for the first time we have the ability to truly serve God.

When Peter finished his first sermon and the people said what should we do, Peter said, "Repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Peter was talking about both dimensions of Christianity: Forgiveness and Spiritual life. For Spiritual life is the presence of the Spirit of God in us.

Many people today are taught about forgiveness of sins but are not taught that they also receive the life of God at conversion. If you are trusting in Jesus as your saving Lord then you have not only been forgiven for your sins but you have also been given the life of God - His Spirit. You've been born again, you are a new creature, and you are one of God's children.

Now what did that life feel like for those first Jewish Christians and what did it look like? As God's children they knew and felt forgiven. There is a cleanness, a wholeness, a guiltlessness that is hard to describe. They knew that they were accepted by God and they felt it. They were experiencing his love in their lives.

BUT HOW WERE THEY EXPERIENCING THAT LOVE, ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS? Was it just that they felt it from God somehow? While I do believe that there is often a very mystical element to this experience of God's love - I believe that most of all God's people experience God's forgiveness, acceptance and love FROM HIS PEOPLE. That spiritual life is given to us by God but **it takes on flesh in the community of God's people.**

Where had these Jewish Christians experienced the forgiveness, acceptance and love that they were so ready to share with others when they were scattered all over the world? They experienced it in their church in Jerusalem - among God's people.

Look with me at Acts 2:41,44ff. When that God-life, that spiritual life took on flesh what did it look like? People serving each other. The Isaacs and Davids forgave each other for old hurts and injustices. The Marthas and Esthers reunited after years of smoldering hostility toward each other. Selfishness broke down and generous cheerful giving to each other became the practice. forgiveness, Acceptance, and Love!

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit-life - the results of that spiritual life in us - is increasingly: patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness etc. Those are attitudes toward other people. God has "birthed" that in us the day we became a Christian - Now it is a matter of letting that life grow and mature by His grace.

Jesus said that He came not to be served but to serve. That was not just a wish or an obligation on his part that was his very nature. Our God is a giving God. Our Lord was a servant King. "Birthed" in us is that same nature - TO SERVE! To forgive someone, accept them and love them

To be certain - the old selfishness wars against it. But in Christ I have been born again and now I can serve. You see God designed us to be servant/lovers not self-centered. And we are not fully human until God recreates in us the likeness of Christ - a servant-lover.

Those Jewish Christians scattered to the world by persecution were SERVANTS and they had learned it in their church. They had experienced it by the humble service of others and now they wanted others to experience it through them. All of the education, promotions, and financial wealth in the world were nothing compared to the "life" they experienced in knowing Jesus through His people.

And all of the prizes, accolades, and kudos that the world could give were nothing compared to the joy of seeing another human being come to know real peace, and joy through Christ.

They knew that God had commissioned them to love people to Jesus - To so live the love of God toward others that they would be attracted to the Source.

God designed it so that the church is His agent to show a desperate, selfish, lonely, dying world of people that through Christ they can know full forgiveness, acceptance and love.

Service is not a price we pay for being forgiven!
Service is not an obligation we fulfill to appease God!
Service is not a duty in order to merit God's favor.

NO. Service is the outgrowth of our new life.

Service is forgiving as I have been forgiven by God.

Service is accepting as I have been accepted by God.

Service is loving and caring for another as God has loved and cared for me through his people.

The issues is not WHETHER genuine Christians will serve it is only HOW.

If you are trusting in Christ as saving/Lord then you have been given the Life of God in you. How will that life reveal itself today?

When you speak to someone today will you seek to love them by showing genuine concern and acceptance?

When you prepare to teach that class of four year olds this next week will you seize the opportunity to serve them?

As you go into your office, school or home will seek the opportunities to show your love?

The story is old but it speaks a great truth: Following World War II an American soldier was walking a street in London when he came upon a small boy dressed in rags and peering longingly into a bakery with his nose pressed against the glass. Recognizing the child as likely one of the orphans of the war, the soldier asked the boy if he was hungry. Getting the obvious answer, the soldier went into the bakery and bought a bag of baked goods and gave them to the boy. The child's face lit up and as the soldier walked away the child caught up and tugged at his sleeve and asked, "Mister, are you God?"

Others should be able to look at us as a group of believers and say "that is what God is like".

And where does it start? It starts with me, and it starts with you. This church will be that kind of church as we serve others. The world will beat a path to the place where they are truly loved.

Those Jewish Christians who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went - servants in every situation.

How about you - Are you ready to live out the life God has given you?

An amazing thing happens as we begin to serve. Many of us find our Christian life to be dull, flat, or lifeless. We have been looking for something to magically make it exciting and fulfilling. But it is not magic, it is Christ! *Matthew 16:25* **"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."**