

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Serving
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Joshua 24:14-25; Luke 5: 17-20

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” These are the words Joshua tells Israel in his farewell address. This isn’t a new revelation for Joshua. He has spent his whole life serving God. Joshua’s leadership has taken Israel from a wandering covenant community to an established nation state. Toward the end of his life he gathers the people of Israel and announces that he is rededicating himself and his household to serve God, affirming that all the work has been worth the struggle and he would do it again if God asked.

His example and leadership over the years has been so reliable that the crowd instinctively shouts back that they too will serve God. But Joshua tells them to slow down and think about this. Joshua wants them to read the user agreement. He has seen what serving God requires. He worked alongside Moses, a man who was a prince in Egypt and in service to God. Moses was asked to leave his comfortable, convenient life in the palace for the life of a fugitive in the desert. Joshua knows from personal experience serving God will require sacrifices, that empty commitments will come with consequences. Before anyone can dedicate their lives to serving God they must acknowledge that service will be inconvenient. The people reply that they are ready to serve God, come what may.

What comes is just as Joshua warned – inconvenient. Women giving birth late in life, men leaving their trades to follow Jesus, children giving up their lunch so that the 5000 adults who forgot to pack a lunch could eat. Serving God is inconvenient.

The story of the four friends and the paralyzed man is filled with inconveniences. The person who owned the house was inconvenienced. Not only had they prepped all week for Jesus’ arrival, the crowd that shows is larger than they anticipated. With so many in their home they were probably worried about things getting broken or stolen. And then the roof is busted through! Some of the people in the crowd were Pharisees. Their inconvenience was a challenge to their world view. Jesus’ message went against fundamentals they had built their lives around and listening to him teach was disturbing and uncomfortable. It was inconvenient. When we read the story of the paralyzed man and his four friends we take for granted that these four men were happy to help. The more likely scenario is that they had other plans for the day. Appointments to make, deadlines to reach, chores to finish, commitments to keep, debts to pay, quality family time to have. But Jesus was in town today.

For some reason they decide to forget everything else that could have gotten done that day, and they lug this full-grown man across town. When they arrive, they find that the crowd is so large they can’t even get to Jesus. It would have been easier to turn around and go home, to come back when Jesus was available. Going home is the convenient option, but instead, they decide to go up onto the roof, dig through the thatching and tiles, and lower their friend down to Jesus. For some reason, this task of getting their friend to Jesus was more important than their excuses not to. It’s possible the man on the bed was just a great guy, the kind of friend to inspire outrageous acts of loyalty. Or maybe, these four men were repaying a favor. Maybe someone had been sick and the others helped him, or maybe one fell on hard times and was supported by the others. Maybe they had inconvenienced others and were simply repaying the time and effort others had spent on them.

Or, maybe they had heard the gospel. They had sat in a crowd listening to Jesus’ message of grace and forgiveness. They had met Jesus’ followers and seen how they loved one another, and the message rang true for them. They had felt that switch flip inside them as they realized God loves them and wants good things for them and for their friend who is paralyzed. This would have been a very different kind of message than anything they had heard before.

This message of abounding love stood against the prevailing theology that God rationed out love to those who were righteous. Jesus rejected the idea that if you were down and out, if you were sick or disabled, it meant God had turned

away from you. Jesus said the sick and poor were blessed, they had worth, they were loved. Inspired by this message, these men carried their friend in his bed. This detail stopped me as I studied the verses this week. He is in his bed. No where in these verses does it say this man is poor; we sometimes assume he is. Its just as possible he has money. Jesus does send him back to “his home” after he is healed. If he has a bed he is doing better than some. Maybe his paralysis is a recent development that has thrown him into a downward spiral, and now his friends can’t even get him into a chair. Now he spends his days in bed, depressed by his circumstances.

Who can blame him, The world tells him his sins caused these circumstances, that God has abandoned him, that he is unloved. The theology of the day shackled him to that bed. The friends knew Jesus’ message was the only way they were going to rescue their friend. They had probably tried to teach him the gospel, to tell him God had not turned away and that in fact God loved him but they could not get through to him. So the only thing left to do was to pick up the bed themselves and walk him to Jesus so he could experience the message of the gospel first hand. The crowd prevented their friend from hearing Jesus – they were still too far away – so they go up to the roof. But the house was so well built they couldn’t hear from the roof and they had to break it down. Their friend had to hear the gospel from Jesus. Nowhere does it say this trip was about getting their friend to walk again. I think they simply wanted him to hear Jesus say, “You are Loved.” It was inconvenient for them, it was back breaking work, it probably cost them a pretty penny to fix the roof, it wasn’t exactly the right weekend to make it all happen, but it was worth it for their friend to know he was loved by them and by God.

This month is Pride Month. There will be endless images of colorful exuberant parties and parades on social media. For me the ones that bring the most joy are the ones of Christians giving free hugs to the participants. A hug is so simple but it means so much. It means, “I am not just willing to be in the same space as you: I want to embrace you, heart to heart.” A hug is a physical expression of acceptance. It acknowledges worth and expresses love, and it’s just a hug. The images won’t show us the inconveniences someone had to go through to get there, the traffic jams, the declined lunch dates. but it does show that for that person, being present was the most valuable and productive thing they could do with their day. It does show that that person has made a commitment to making another human feel loved. That that person has said, “I will serve the Lord.”

When we think of service we think of building, cooking, visiting. The physical actions we do with our bodies. In some ways that is correct; serving is about the physical movement of our bodies, but it is less about “the job” we are doing and more about where our bodies are. When we show up for someone we are casting a vote for them. Our physical presence says to the world I stand with them and against the forces hurting them. We can say children deserve a good education or the homeless need a place to go in the winter, but placing our bodies, the most valuable and fragile thing we have, into the issue is next level. This guy’s friends climbed to the top of a house and broke through the roof! They used their bodies to physically cast a vote that said you have worth, you are loved. The single most powerful thing you can do for someone who is in need is to move toward them, sit with them, physically be there for them.

Service is not about “being able to do a job;” it is about being physically present for someone else – no matter the inconveniences. Not all service is going to be inconvenient. A large part of my job and the work of our Outreach Ministries Committee is to make service as convenient as we can for you. Some service will come naturally and you will be happy to be present for the people who need you in that time. But eventually God will call you to do something inconvenient in service of the gospel. You will have to give up the one free night you have. You will be asked to make another meal for another family in the church who has had a baby. You will have to visit someone for the 5th week in a row. When those inconvenient calls come, a voice in your head will run through all the reasons you can’t possibly help. It will try to convince you that you don’t have to BE there, you could just ...

When that voice starts its list of inconveniences it is time to stop and decide if we want to rededicate ourselves to serving the Lord, if we are willing to put our bodies into the issues we say we care about. Every time we step out in service we rededicate our lives to the love God has shown us. We ensure the message of the gospel survives by physically bringing the love it inspires to those who need it. When we offer our time, our hands, our shoulder we affirm that the gospel is worth the inconveniences and cast a vote that tells the world God’s love is here.