

Spiritual Disciplines: Service  
Isaiah 58:6-12  
WRCoB 9.13.20

Today, we look at the spiritual discipline of service

This is not a new discipline for Brethren.

In fact, we self-identify as workers for the Lord.

It's in our tagline

Continuing the **work** of Jesus  
Peacefully, simply, together.

Or as the Church of the Brethren website affirms:

*We simply try to do what Jesus did. Jesus brought a message of life, love, and hope. But he offered much more than inspiring words:*

*He understood that people's spiritual needs also include day-to-day human ones — food, health, rest, comfort, friendship, and unconditional acceptance.*

If the cross of Jesus is the symbol of submission  
Then the basin and towel symbolizes service.

The fact is, the Brethren recognize footwashing  
As one of its ordinances.

For it was the night before they crucified Jesus  
While he and his disciples were in the upper room

That Jesus took a basin and a towel  
And washed his disciples' feet.

After he was finished, Jesus said

**John 13:12b “Do you know what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup>  
You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for  
that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have  
washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s  
feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have set you an example, that you also  
should do as I have done to you.**

Brethren understand that this teaching  
Calls Jesus' followers to do the same  
Figuratively and literally  
To serve the needs of others.

Bernard of Clairvaux—*Learn the lesson that, if you are to do  
the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a  
hoe.*

The passage in Isaiah that Brother Thoko read this morning  
Is part of a larger conversation  
That warrants a closer look.

The people of Israel practiced spiritual disciplines.

They prayed and they fasted  
As any good, religious Jew would do  
And yet, they felt God keenly absent.

**Isaiah 58:3 'We have fasted before you!' they say.  
'Why aren't you impressed'?  
We have been very hard on ourselves  
And you've hardly notice it!'**

Not too many Sunday ago  
I preached on the merits of the four disciplines  
Meditation, prayer, fasting and study.

I spoke of the benefits of these inner disciplines  
As a way to deepen our connection to God.

I still advocate for them.

These disciplines deepens faith  
Brings one closer to God  
And helps relieve the stresses of daily living.

They are extremely helpful.

But they are not an end to themselves.

Religious ritual is not just a self-help program.

The disciplines are to prepare ourselves  
To gain the strength, the courage, insight and the will  
To do the things that God wills for us.

Religious ritual, then, is a means to an end.

And that end is?  
The kingdom of God!

Our faith is never be complete  
Without the rubber of faith  
Hitting the pavement of kingdom building

God does not notice our fasting  
If it, in turn, it doesn't manifest itself into fruitful action.

Isaiah makes very clear what God desires demands.

**Isaiah 58:3b Look you serve your own interests on your fast day, and oppress your workers. . . . Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.**

**<sup>6</sup>Is it not the fast I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?**

**<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?**

Based on this text, it seems pretty clear  
That fasting in and of itself, doesn't impress God.

Loving our neighbors, caring for others  
Fighting against injustices and oppression  
Standing in solidarity with the marginalized  
And even, get this, not turning your back on kin.

This kind of fasting impresses God.  
It is this that God notices.

Jesus spoke similarly in Matthew 25.

He taught a parable about judgment day  
When God divides the goats from the sheep.

The goats, poor things,  
Are sent into the eternal furnaces of hell  
The sheep, into God's eternal kingdom.

The criteria Jesus uses to determine  
Which goes where is this:

**Matthew 25:35 “. . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,**

**<sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”**

**<sup>40</sup> “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”**

That to believe in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior  
To practice the personal disciplines  
Of meditation, prayer, fasting, and study

And to accept that as the essential goal of faith  
Doesn't quite cut it, in God's eyes  
Unless it bears the fruit of good works.

Simply put,  
The inner disciplines build us up spiritually  
To do the good work of saving the world.

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But hear me clearly  
We are not the ones who will save the world.

It is God alone.

Jesus came into the world to save the world  
And he calls followers  
To work with him, in him, and through him.

The discipline of service is the quintessential goal  
Of God in Jesus coming into the world  
So that none of us, **none of us**, should perish.

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Jesus uses the example of footwashing  
To teach two things  
That go hand in hand . . .  
Service and humility.

Service without humility  
Seeks only for the recognition it brings to itself.

Service without humility  
Seeks the biggest splash with minimal effort.

Service without humility  
Needs to know that others are watching  
And appreciating their self-sacrificial efforts.

On the other hand

Service that follows in the likeness of Jesus

Needs no recognition

No external rewards

No appreciation for services rendered.

If Christian service is to be of God

Immerse it in humility.

Richard Foster, in the *Celebration of the Disciplines*

Says humility is a virtue.

However, it is not attained by seeking it.

Foster: *The more we pursue it the more distant it becomes. To think we have it is sure evidence that we don't (p. 130).*

William Law wrote a book in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

Entitled *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

He understood that it is the discipline of service

That brings humility.

If we desire to live a humble life Law writes we are to:

*Condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creatures, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be*

*a servant of servants and condescend to do the lowest offices to the lowest of mankind.*

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So what does the discipline of service look like for you?

How might it fit into your life?

God calls many to serve in ministry or mission work  
Serving God and neighbor in church related careers.

God calls others to vocations in human services  
For example, education, health care, and public service.

Still others choose to work in other fields  
And use their personal time and talents to serve others

Volunteering in a food bank  
Providing meals for homeless shelters  
Going on disaster work trips.

The call to love God and serve neighbor  
Comes in many different forms.

But the call is there for all of who follow Jesus.

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There are also common concerns which all of us  
Must work toward eradicating.

Isaiah called the people of Israel  
To loose the bonds of injustices

The inequities and injustices are all around us  
Issues from racism to health care for all  
From economic disparities to equal opportunity

From the health of our planet earth  
To the health in international relations.

God calls us to speak out and work toward  
Alleviating the injustices around us.

And finally,  
God always calls us to relate to others  
In kind and caring ways.

In a place that now reeks of division  
Jesus calls us to be bridge-builders  
Rather than bridge-burners  
To unite rather than divide

To love our neighbor near and far as God loved us.

The discipline of service is the rubber  
That hits the pavement of justice and righteousness.

Again from the Church of the Brethren website

*“I am the way,” he told his followers. He showed them how to trust, how to care, and how to help.*

*Steadily, lovingly, even radically, Jesus went about saving the world — by serving its people. Because we believe his message, we seek to do the same.*