

## **Serving Just as We Are**

A Meditation for Service as Worship Sunday

Galatians 5: 13-26

June 18, 2017

By Rev. Jessica Gregory

A week ago last Friday, my seven-year-old son Nathan and I joined the junior high youth on their trip to serve at Feed My Starving Children. FMSC is a Christian non-profit organization that for thirty years has been providing nutritionally complete meals designed specifically for malnourished children around the world, and in our country too. Volunteers hand-pack all the meals in an incredibly efficient assembly line process, a process in which people ages 5 to 95 can participate.

When I learned how young a child could be to volunteer I was thrilled. I have found it challenging to find meaningful, engaging service projects for young children and was excited to give Nathan this opportunity. It didn't hurt that the junior high kids would be there either because it's pretty cool to do something with the big kids! And so we went, neither of us sure of what we'd be doing. From the moment we walked in the door we were warmly welcomed and given clear instructions.

An introductory video helped all of us understand why we were making the meals and who was going to eat them. And then we went into the kitchen and took our stations in the assembly line. It took Nathan a little while but pretty soon he was scooping soy and rice like a pro! And he was having fun. As I watched him enjoying his simple tasks, working side-by-side with our junior high youth (who were really good sports about having him along!), I felt my eyes get watery. The joy I experienced seeing my child serve others was powerful. A typical seven-year-old, Nathan generally thinks about his own needs. To see him engaging in a task for others, and finding happiness in doing it, was a beautiful moment, hopefully a prelude of many to come, in which he will be living out our commandment to love one another.

It is this commandment that Paul recites in his letter to Galatians in our passage for this morning: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." Paul is reminding the people of Galatia of this law during a time when they are being swayed of their Christian beliefs by other teachers. Paul taught about Jesus' life and death as faith incarnate coming to us — God's promise fulfilled. Since this promise of faith has been fulfilled through Jesus it is no longer necessary to adhere to the Jewish law of circumcision, previously a necessary step to be included among God's people. The first part of chapter 5 is all about this question: Do gentiles need to be circumcised as a demonstration of their faith? Paul says absolutely not. In fact, he believes that to do so would be to revert to the time before Jesus came and would make Jesus' death pointless. Through Jesus, the Gentiles have been received by God just as they are, no circumcision needed. This is the message that Paul passionately tries to get across to his brothers and sisters in Galatia.

But it is hard. In many ways, what the other teachers are suggesting makes sense, after all, it is the Jewish law. It will certainly be unpleasant for the Gentile men to get circumcised but it would also be a physical way of affirming one's belief. And having it done could be seen as a way to make the man more faithful. But Paul is suggesting something totally different, which is must more difficult to do. He is asserting that the Gentiles are accepted just as they are. They are accepted, but they also have responsibilities. Rather than have something done to them, they must do something — they must live out their faith. As verse 13 says: "You have been given freedom, through Jesus, now you have two choices: to use it for self-indulgence or use it to serve one another out of love. By doing the latter, you live out the commandment given us: Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

The commandment is vague, you can love your neighbor in any way you'd like, but you must show them love. This is a fabulous and challenging freedom, friends. It means that all of us can do something and none of us is off the hook.

On this Service as Worship day, we are few in number because many of our members are out serving. They are in Appalachia preparing to begin work to make homes warmer, safer, and drier this week. They are running in the 18th annual Ricky Birdsong "Race against Hate" here in Evanston, honoring the Northwestern basketball coach who was killed in 1999 by a white supremacist, and running in solidarity for a community that is integrated and strong in its diversity.

Men, women and children are outside serving in very physical ways, ways that for many of us are no longer possible, or never were. A lot of service opportunities do require mobility and stamina that are not universal.

Just as it is challenging to find meaningful, engaging service for our young children, it can be hard to find opportunities for adults with physical limitations. But as Paul reminds us, our command is simply to love our neighbor in any way we can.

Sometimes that help, sharing love with another, isn't very enjoyable. Writing a letter to your Congresswoman for the fifth time about the need for a state budget isn't fun, but it is loving, as it brings us closer to a reality that gives many of our neighbors' resources they are losing in this limbo time. To help us live out our commitments to service God has given us two important things: the first are the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The second is community. Delight is found in doing just about anything when doing it with others.

Truth be told, the acts of filling the food packs at Feed My Starving Children is repetitive and could get boring if you weren't having so much fun with those you were serving with, and happy to know that what you were doing was helping to feed children who live daily with more hunger than we will ever know. And the peace found through the moving of the Holy Spirit during service work gives such joy!

This morning we are gathered and the Spirit is moving in this place. As part of our worship this day we will share our love for neighbors through service work-. There is something that everyone can do. Some of us will be washing pill bottles so that they may be sent to Africa where they will be reused (rather than a napkin or envelope) by doctors there for medications.

We will also be filling hygiene kits for guests that participate in The Night Ministry. And, finally we will be sorting hygiene goods for Sarah's Circle, which is an organization in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago serving homeless and at-risk women.

Carolyn Golmon, Nan Snowden, Laurie Davies and Scott Kellogg, as well as others from the Mission & Social Justice committee, have prepared these service opportunities for us and are here to guide us in our work.

Here again, with fresh ears the commandment that sums up our task as Christians: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." May we live out this commandment, each in our own way, serving as we are and to God's glory. Thanks be to God. Amen.