

October 25, 2009 The Ways We Care : Service Acts 9:1-6

**October 25, 2009**  
**The Ways We Care, Week 3: Service**  
**The Rev. Michael Love**  
**Scripture Acts 9:1-6**

Saul was doing everything he'd been trained for. He was at the top of his game. He was protecting the faith from interlopers. This was good work, let's be clear... Except for one thing, Saul wasn't paying attention to the one who had called him into service in the first place. He was just going along, acting out of habit and training, and had stopped reflecting on what his job was. Saul, devout as he was, was not alert to God's call to service in those moments when he was dragging Jesus followers from their homes and hauling them off to the authorities.

Had he remained alert to God, that startling Damascus Road experience, that desert highway flash of light and thunderstruck blinding wouldn't have been so startling.

We know when we're out of line with God. And yet God still has ways to startle us when we drift. Ever been startled by God in this way? I have. I've been startled when, even though I was doing everything I'd trained for, I was struck to the ground by Jesus' alarming question:

"Michael. Michael. Why do you persecute me?"

When you hear THAT question, you can be sure that a Mid-Course Correction in your life has begun. Like Saul, when we lose focus on God, when we elevate other concerns and projects above God, then we have worked against the best interest of the Body of Christ.

Service is one of the gifts of membership that we promise. It is one of the harder promises of membership that we keep. I can pray, daily, work to give my tithe, commit to being present in the congregation; but fulfilling my service and being a witness to my faith...those two require that I act beyond my own interest. Those two require an added blessing of God's grace for the strength to commit and follow-through.

But when we are enabled by God to serve, there is no other

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experience of religious life quite like it. We have heard time and time again of the ones who serve in the world and comes back reporting all that THEY have gained. When we step out in faith as servant ministers, as volunteers, as healers; so often we return as the ones healed ourselves.

It's that we are completed when we serve. We are not whole when we serve only our interest or are ourselves served by others. Only in service do we become whole. That is a statement of our faith.

And so this morning we examine the third of our membership promises : Service. We acknowledge God's generosity to us and respond in faith. Service is one of the ways we are given to respond.

I need to add a supplemental reading today, from the prophet Isaiah, who knew something about being called into service by the Lord. In the beginning of the book of Isaiah, we hear 5 chapters of bad news, tough times, hard living and low expectations. It is a sobering introduction to Isaiah's call from God. It's as if the writer wants to make sure that we know in what social environment Isaiah is being called. And so then in Isaiah 6:8, he finally tells us, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, [into service and witness in these extraordinary times] and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here I am; send me!"

Now, I have to hand to Isaiah. He answered more quickly than I could have. But then again, Isaiah knew that God doesn't suggest we serve. The tradition of faith understands service as an essential part of our relationship with God. Not optional. Indeed, the bible is filled with episodes of the prophets speaking on God's behalf, warning against empty observances, vacant service, listless attention, distant allegiance. The radical message of Jesus Christ follows in the same tradition. If you seek to follow me (Jesus say) then you will be last in line, dragging a cross, speaking out for justice and probably drawing heat for doing so.

That's enough to knock you off your horse. To come up to a full stop against that assertion of risk-taking service (to borrow a phrase from one of our UM bishops, Robert Schanese) is for most of us, like having God suddenly change our job description. We might be understood if we said, "Gee, this isn't what I thought I signed up for!"

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What would you do if God changed your job description? How would you react. Because under all that dramatic language of "Saul, still breathing murderous threats." Is the story of a mid-course correction. A job-description change. A mid-life crisis. *That's* what happened to Saul. That's happened to me. Has it ever happened to you?

Doing one thing with zeal and certainty, over-certainty really, and all the while being off-course? God can and does enter into our lives in moments of opportunity, maybe when our defenses are down, because life is handing us some challenges, or maybe when our defenses are down, because we think we've got it all under control. God is opportunistic, because God knows us well enough to understand that it often takes a blinding light and a voice like thunder from the sky to get our attention back to what's important.

This text is set in the drama of the life of the early church, when one of the challenges had a name, Saul. This text is the story of how God's grace can even overtake a cruel and fanatical mind and aim it in a new direction of service.

Are you open to God changing the work plan of your life? Are you open to God changing your job description? If you've ever changed jobs, switched majors in college, transferred to another post, moved, got laid off or went back to school to learn a new career, you've been through this already. You know what I'm asking of you. You know the gravity of this question.

This morning maybe you were thinking as you glanced over the bulletin and saw the title of the sermon, maybe you were thinking that I would be celebrating service. And I am. But you may not be as ready for me to speak about why a call to service is a call to some kind of change initiated by God. Why not just serve, Pastor? Why do I have to go through a job description change?

Let me answer that by asking another question. Is there anyone here who has not had to make a course correction at some point in their journey? Is this actually new to anyone? I suspect it's not. As for me, I wouldn't choose it. But you know, I've just had too much experience of God doing just that in my life. And I've had too much experience of seeing God doing just that in other's lives.

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When God calls us to service there's usually some kind of change ahead for us as the ones who serve.

So, are we open to God changing the "job description" of our lives? If you can say, even hesitantly, "yes" then you have made the gift of service. Because when you say yes to service, you had said, "here I am Lord". And God puts us to the field of work then that God has chosen.

I'd much rather pick my favorite service or helping-area and have God bless and equip me for that. That's mostly how we go about this service thing. And that's okay, but it's not quite the service we pledge to in our membership vows. The kind of service we pledge to, results in chances to serve that sometimes come as a surprise or an unexpected opportunity in an area that we could not ourselves imagine.

Ever have an odd job?

I found some odd jobs the other day. Listen to this.

How about being a Hair Simulation Supervisor?

Believe it or not, digital artists proficient in the art of creating 3-D hair are hot commodities in the world of animation. Just ask Mark Thomas Henne, the man responsible for every follicle flip in Pixar's CGI blockbuster, 'The Incredibles.' According to Nathan Pieratt, Director of the Online Animation Program at Westwood College, the industry has shifted from 2-D design to 3-D digital media, giving rise to highly specific jobs. So you could be a Hair Simulation Specialist.

Need something odder? How about being a Banana Gasser? - Less flatulent than it sounds, banana gassers finish off what Mother Nature started. To make sure the bottom of your banana split is tasty, bananas are shipped while they're still green to prevent bruising. Gassers for the JFC Fruit Company are in charge of moving new shipments into hermetically sealed chambers where the fruit is sprayed with an ethylene gas to catalyze ripening.

And my favorite: A Fire Scientist. That sounds cool before you even know what it is. A fire scientist specializes in experiments involving flame. They do everything from checking gas pipe leaks to blowing things up. Grads from the University of Maryland's University College online fire science program not only learn the

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science behind smithereens, but are also trained in emergency management and arson investigation. <sup>1</sup>

There are many odd jobs out there. God calls us to odd jobs, too, sometimes.

I once found myself called to teach Sunday School in a downtown church in Los Angeles where Spanish was the first language of the congregation. I was in my first year of high school Spanish as I remember and it definitely was not enough Spanish to teach Sunday School. For some reason, I said, "Here I am." And it was an amazing experience as the class took care of me and I worked diligently to tell la vida de Jesus en espanol.

Bottom Line:

God changed Saul's Job Description....God will change yours when you bring your life to the altar of service. It is not only that we are asked to submit to God's draft call, it's more than that. I believe that when we do something that God has called us to, rather than something that I have picked, that our own lives are also transformed.

There are 4 hymns in our hymnal that reflect Isaiah's answer to God's call, "Here I am, send me." One of them is hymn number 436, "The Voice of God is Calling." The third verse makes this pledge: "We heed, O Lord your summons, and answer: "Here are we! Send us upon *YOUR* errand, let us *YOUR* servant be."

As we consider God's call to us in service, may these words be our own response as well.

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1 from <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/08/16/odd-jobs-and-crazy-careers/>