

This Is Our Song

1) "The Song of Service"

Mark 10: 35-45

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In 1873, Fanny Crosby, one of the most prolific hymn writers of her day, penned the lyrics to what would become one of her most popular creations: "Blessed Assurance." This is a hymn that some of us grew up singing and others of us have learned to appreciate as we have traveled the road of faith in our adult years. Not surprisingly, a favorite part of this hymn for many is the refrain: **"This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long."**

It is this line from this old hymn in our hymnal that has inspired our current sermon series. Over the past several weeks, we have been thinking about our story—that is, the story that we share as a congregation and the sixty years of our history that has led us to this moment of time. We have been thinking about our story and the next chapter that we will write in our life together. And we have been thinking about our story as a people of faith—a story that is represented in the Exodus story and the journey of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

This is, however, more to the refrain than merely the reference to our story. The second part of this musical equation proclaims that "This is my song." Now, in the case of this hymn, the use of the word song can be understood literally. The story of our faith inspires our desire to sing the praises of the One who offers the "Blessed Assurance" of grace.

For my purposes this morning, however, I would invite you to reflect upon a more metaphorical interpretation of the word "song." In this understanding, the word, "song" becomes more than merely a musical reference. It becomes a way of expressing ourselves in response to the story of God's liberating love at work in our lives. Our song, therefore, is our witness that grows out of our experience of God's grace. Our song is the action we take in response to this grace.

Over the next four weeks, we will be thinking about this song of our response and the way that we speak it, sing it, and act it out in the context of our everyday lives. This morning, we begin "part two" of this series by considering "the song of service."

Our story of faith, of course, cannot truly be told without referencing the importance of the song of service. The choice to serve others was fundamental to the thinking and teaching of Jesus. Indeed, it was his choice to become a servant to others that both amazed and frightened those who surrounded him. It amazed those who lived on the lower rungs of the social ladder. Time and again, we are told that these people were "astonished" by his teaching and that they had never heard anything like it for he taught as one who had authority—not like the religious leaders who were constantly demanding their respect and

allegiance. To observe someone who chose to lead through the witness of service was something that they could not have imagined.

On the other hand, the religious leaders were often frightened and fearful of Jesus' witness of servanthood because it dramatically exposed their own self-centeredness and their own unwillingness to care deeply enough about the needs of others to do anything about those needs. To be sure, they would offer lip service—but not the true service that was needed.

There were, of course, many facets of Jesus' witness that would make such a powerful impact not only upon the people of his time, but the people of all times. Yet, I believe, his choice to serve and not to be served that was the most radical and for some, the most unsettling part of his witness.

In our lesson from Mark's Gospel we are privileged to be a "fly on the wall" as we listen in on the exchanged between Jesus and his closest followers—the inner circle of his disciples.

Now, you would think that they would know better and yet, as Mark describes the exchange, it is clear that they have much to learn. James and John come to Jesus with a request. They want to be granted the privilege of sitting with Jesus in his glory—one on the right, the other on the left. While this request may seem a bit mysterious and other worldly to us in our contemporary understanding, let's be clear about what they are asking for.

They are asking for personal privilege. They are asking for public attention and praise. They are asking for the special perks that come with the office of being the Messiah.

As a fly on the wall, I can imagine what Jesus must have been feeling inside. I can imagine the energy draining right out of him as he listens to this self-centered request. Have James and John understood nothing about his message? Have they understood nothing of his witness? How could they even think of asking such an audacious question?!

Nevertheless, Jesus responds in a way that does not dismiss or diminish them. He asks if they are able to face the demands and challenges that he will face because of his self-less service. When they assure him that they are able, he simply informs them that their request is something that he cannot grant.

But, the true teaching moment of this passage comes into focus when the other disciples overhear this exchange and they are not nearly as gentle with James and John as Jesus. Mark tells us that they are angry—and, I might add—understandably so. Before the tension escalates any further, Jesus calls them together and clarifies the matter that threatens to divide them.

"You know the way it is with the Gentiles," he said. You know that, in their culture, it is acceptable for the rulers to lord it over the people and that it is commonplace for tyrants to rule by exercising their power and authority over those who have none. That's the way that they define greatness. But, while this is their way, it is not to be our way. The one who wishes to be great must be a servant and the one who wishes to be first, must be a slave of all. And then, Jesus offered his own personal mission statement:

“For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

There are, of course, many other passages in the Gospels that reinforce this teaching of the central importance of service—of choosing to set aside one’s own ego, one’s own agenda, one’s own desire to be recognized and celebrated in favor of the choice to simply serve the other. And it is the Gospel of John’s account of Jesus’ choice to wash the feet of his disciples that we vividly see what the choice to serve looks like in flesh and blood terms. And then, of course, there is the cross itself—the ultimate symbol of the choice to “deny oneself” and one’s ego in favor of giving oneself away in the service of others.

This is why, you see, I suggest that our story cannot truly be told without giving witness to the song of service. Without this expression of service, our story loses its punch line and our song sounds out of tune. It is, you might say, “step one” in the journey of following Jesus.

Now, that, of course, is not exactly new news to any one of us at the San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church. We understand that service must be something more than an occasional thought. It must be a way of life—an integral part of our DNA as a community of faith. Some of you will remember that when Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast twelve years ago, the Spirit of God moved in a powerful way within our congregation. In response to the devastation, we sent mission teams to Pascagoula, Mississippi and other locations to help with the clean-up and the recovery. Not only did we send teams of people, but we sent money to help with this massive effort. We built framework for houses and shipped them to Macomb, Mississippi to help provide housing. And we were just getting started.

That effort led to a renewed emphasis on supporting the work of UVMIM—United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. We purchase a tool trailer to help with various local projects. We reinforced our commitment to serve in local soup kitchens and the county food bank. As you may remember, that building momentum led to our first ever mission service Saturday when our church “left the building” to serve others in our community.

Over the years, we have sent teams to serve others in a variety of settings—including Guatemala, Mexico, the Central Valley and Southern California.

Then, in January of 2010, Haiti was rocked with a devastating earthquake and there were those from our own congregation who responded to the need to help dig out from the rubble. That effort, of course, has evolved into a unique ministry of its own, thanks to the vision and passion of Warren McGuffin. Today, there is a school in the village of Thomas and there is a food program and solar panels and computers and hope where there wasn’t any hope before. In the near future, there will be a bakery that provides income for workers and bread for the feeding program

Do you see a pattern here? Do you, by chance, see the finger prints of God’s Spirit all over these efforts? I hope that you do because they are! God’s Spirit has been hard at work over the years through many of you and your efforts to serve others. What started as a simple response to human need has evolved into a many faceted effort to help and heal, to teach and to touch, to

love and to serve. Thanks be to God for all that has been, for all that is and for all that will yet be. You see, God is not finished with us yet! Let me add that I hope that you will stay after worship this morning to help with the Habitat Play House construction or the “Rise Against Hunger” effort to pack meals for hungry people around the world. It is, after all, in our DNA.

This past week, we have been dealing with the shock and disbelief that has followed the nightmare of violence in Las Vegas. In the aftermath of this unspeakable tragedy, we have seen a familiar pattern emerge. There is the expression of shock, disillusionment and outrage. There is the frustration over the failure to enact laws that would prevent the sales of assault rifles and silencers and armor penetrating bullets. And there is the reluctance of our leaders to address this concern in a thoughtful and hopeful way. It is the same familiar cycle that we have observed far too many times in recent years.

There is, as you know, a definition of insanity that suggests that, **“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”** Given this understanding, it’s hard not to feel as if we are slowly becoming insane as a people. We refuse to acknowledge the fundamental premise that “violence begets violence.” More guns will not make us any safer. They will only make us more violent. That is a truth that we seem unable and unwilling to grasp. While some would see this as a political issue, I see it primarily as a spiritual issue—one that is rooted in the witness of Jesus and his refusal to return evil for evil. That discussion, however, is for another time.

This morning, I would simply like to suggest that there is a prescription for the madness that has currently taken hold. There is, I believe, a remedy to the insanity that seems to be settling in around us. That prescription, I believe, can be found, at least in part, in the simple and humble choice to serve others.

While it is positively overwhelming to think that we can somehow dramatically change our culture of violence, it is possible to bring about this needed change one act of service at a time. At the very least, our choice to serve is a way of reminding ourselves that there is a viable alternative to violence...a way of escaping the insanity that swirls around us.

It was, of course, Gandhi who famously observed that, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” And that is precisely what we are seeing today—a world that is losing its ability to see the possibility and potential of life.

It is my hope and my prayer that, as those who have chosen to follow Jesus, we will allow his words and witness to so penetrate our hearts and our minds that we will counter our culture of violence in the choice to serve others. What our nation needs now, more than ever, are those who will rely not upon weapons to destroy and kill, but upon the witness of love and service that brings life.

It was Oscar Hammerstein who wrote:

A bell’s not a bell ‘til you ring it, a song is not a song ‘til you sing it, Love in your heart wasn’t put there to stay. Love isn’t love ‘til you give it away.”

It's true. Love doesn't really matter unless you give it away through the choice to serve others. May it be said of you and me and the witness of our congregation that we are a people who serve...a people who live out our conviction to sing the song of service with passion and purpose and power. Amen!