



Sunday, Aug. 30, 2020
August Sermon Series: Values That Guide Us

We Are Sent to Serve
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Matthew 14:13-21 NRSV

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

We didn't have the Great Minnesota Get-Together this summer. There were no throngs of people to watch, no grandstand performances, no photography exhibit. But for those hungry for a taste of state fair food, there was the State Fair Food Parade. Perhaps you've seen some of the pictures. Cars lined up for miles on end. Parade-goers ordering many of their favorites: cheese curds, pronto pups, french fries, and the always delectable Sweet Martha's Cookies. What is it about food that brings us together? I'm not sure I have the answer, but I do know we've been missing this lately...a lot!

There are many stories about food in the Bible: manna and quail in the wilderness; a widow's jar which never runs dry; Jesus and his disciples sharing one last supper in the Upper Room. Some of the stories are about people who are physically hungry, but many go beyond that. They're about people who are looking for a place to connect with others, a place to belong. I suspect that's true of fair goers too. They could probably live without cheese

curds until 2021, but they long to be part of something bigger than themselves.

We've been focusing on Zumbro's core values during the month of August. These values ground us in something bigger than ourselves. Today we're looking at our fifth core value: *we are sent to serve*. Like all the values, this gives us an identity. It guides our actions. It inspires us to get up off the couch and do something. And, like the other values, it's a lot more fun when we're able to do it with others...but that require creativity these days.

Our Bible reading takes place early in Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist has tragically died at the hands of King Herod. The disciples are beginning to see that following Jesus comes with a cost. I mean, it's one thing to *believe* in a rabbi. It's another thing entirely to start doing what the rabbi is asking you to do.

As the story unfolds, Jesus hears about John's death. You can feel the tension in the air. Jesu breathes a heavy sigh. He needs to be by himself for a while. Maybe Jesus is beginning to count the cost too. Even though he's off by himself, the news spreads quickly and the crowds come. They're searching, clamoring, wanting to be part of something bigger than themselves. To his credit, Jesus doesn't turn away but instead has compassion for them. He teaches, heals, and commends them for their search. The crowds are getting bigger. Jesus will soon need help in serving them.

LifeKeys is a book by David Stark and Jane Kise. At its core, it's a program about discovering our gifts and putting those gifts into action. When LifeKeys gets to the chapter on serving, the authors put it like this: "Fulfillment is making music where God wants you to play." That sounds lovely, and promising, until a swarm of people start showing up. Before the day is over, these people are tired and hungry and clamoring for bread. Then what? The disciples want to send the people into town. You know how it is: the mission budget is tight; the crowds can fend for themselves. But Jesus won't hear of it. Instead he says, "*You give them something to eat.*"

Gulp! What do we hear in LifeKeys? *Fulfilment is making music where God wants you to play.* The disciples are being sent to serve, but suddenly it feels too big, too hard, too much for them to handle. How can they possibly do it? They better band together, that's for sure, and they better pray like crazy for help from above.

I have a niece named Tina. Tina has been making music for the last couple years at a company in Kansas City called "Print Forest." According to Tina's mother - my sister Bernice - she's determined to save the planet. Tina is a bit

more modest in her claims, but she really does care about God's good creation and she wants to tend to it.

The company had been recycling for a number of years, but then Tina showed up to help them take the next step. Now they're working to get to "zero-waste," and that involves everything from repurposing their packaging materials, to finding a place for partially-used ink cartridges, to recycling a banana peel from somebody's lunch. Do the employees always want to do it? No, of course not. But Tina is good at getting them on the same page. It takes organization, containers, labeling, and above all, a belief they can make a difference. Tina puts it like this: "I can't reuse and recycle all by myself. It's too big, too hard, too much. It takes all of us working together." When Tina gets home at the end of the day, she has a feeling of satisfaction. She has made a difference.

Friends, can you find ways to care for God's good creation? Sure you can, and already do. How about recycling paper and cardboard? How about drinking filtered water instead of water out of plastic bottles? How about exploring renewable energy? You have been sent to serve. Caring for creation is a great way to do it! *Fulfillment is making music where God wants you to play!*

Sara Holmes was making music this past summer down in the kitchen at Zumbro. Sara grew up at Zumbro. She was our summer intern for Open Table. Why a summer intern? Because it's harder to find volunteers during COVID-19. Sara said yes. In no time at all, she rolled up her sleeves and got to work. She played a special role in mentoring the middle school and high school kids as they "served local" instead of going on mission trips. She had them making burritos, baking cookies, and passing out children's books.

Sara loved being a part of this food ministry. I'm sure there were days when it felt too big, too hard, too much. She says she gained a better understanding of all the volunteers it takes for Open Table. She gained a deeper sense of how hard it must be for people to come for burritos week after week, admitting they're hungry. Most of all, Sara enjoyed getting out of the truck - mask on, of course - and mixing with the people. She said, "These are people worthy of dignity and respect. We have more in common than we realize." Every Thursday, Sara went home with a feeling of satisfaction. She had made a difference.

Friends, can you find ways to feed the hungry? Sure you can, and already do. Some of you work at Community Food Response. Others give to Channel One. And as part of our Mission Mondays for Open Table, you provided ingredients for burritos. You donated over a thousand children's books that were shared with families. You helped us pay for a summer intern. Some of

you even came to cook. You have been sent to serve. Feeding hungry people is a great way to do it. *Fulfillment is making music where God wants you to play!*

Diana Fink of Zumbro was making music as she sewed red stoles for our confirmands. In case you didn't know, we had confirmation outside on the lawn last Saturday evening. The confirmands made all sorts of engaging designs on their stoles. Those stoles were to be a mark of their ministry as followers of Jesus.

Diana was grateful to be asked. She said, "During COVID-19, I was glad to be able to enhance someone else's life. It was my way of sharing the gifts God has given me."

Friends, can you use your gifts in some way? Sure you can, and already do. And COVID has given us many new ways to do it: Carol Post joined Diana in sewing red masks for our confirmands. Some of you buy groceries for folks at risk. Others are pen pals for our seniors or call to check up on those going through a tough time. Some have made room in your home for a family member. Others are finding ways to teach your children at home. Many are stocking store shelves, tending the sick, and even doing research on a possible vaccine. My hope is that, when it feels too big, too hard, too much, you can come home at the end of the day, not just bone tired, but feeling satisfied. You have made a difference. *Fulfillment is making music where God wants you to play!*

Let's be honest, we are living in terribly uncertain times. Our footing is not as secure as before. We have to figure out new ways to serve...one step at a time. Pastor Shelley and I have a former colleague named Mary Pechauer. Mary has four children: Siri, Jens, Liv, and Mikkel. Mary tells the story of one day waiting for her kids to come home from school. It was springtime. There'd been freezing rain. The sidewalk was slippery.

Mary describes it like this: "Mikkel, my youngest, and I were at our living room window at 4:00 o'clock, waiting for the other kids to get home from school. I watched them get off the bus and walk towards home. I could tell things were going to get dicey. Siri, my oldest, was 10 at the time. She slipped and fell. She picked herself up and continued down the sidewalk. But soon afterward, my son Jens, who was 7, fell too. That's when I ran to the door to help. You see, my other daughter, Liv, who was 6 at the time, has cerebral palsy. She runs and skips with the best of them, but one thing she cannot do is catch herself when she falls. She doesn't have the reflexes. If Liv falls, she can get seriously hurt. So I opened the door and was about to head out, but then stopped for a second look.

“Siri and Jens had backtracked by this time. They were standing next to Liv. Liv knows her limits and she knew the danger of taking one more step. She was absolutely still. I could see the three of them carefully assessing the situation. And then they started to move. Jens helped Liv off with her backpack and handed it to Siri. Then he got down on his hands and knees and began to crawl very slowly across the sidewalk. He looked back and was encouraging Siri to follow. Siri got down on all fours with a backpack over her shoulder. They paused for a minute.”

Says Mary: “I couldn’t hear their conversation, but it was fun imagining what it was. Siri and Jens were working hard to encourage Liv. I imagine them telling her they’d be right there with her – one in front to lead and one beside to help her along the way. Finally, convinced, Liv followed. She got down on all fours. And the three of them shuffled along, crawling safely home.

Friends, doesn’t this feel a little like what we’re experiencing these days? Life is full of uncertainty, slippery every step of the way. We are sent to serve, but who and where and how? And will it be safe?

Like those disciples, we might be tempted to send the people into town to fend for themselves. It feels too big, too hard, too much – most of the time. But Jesus doesn’t let us off the hook that easily: “You give them something to eat,” he says. “You find a way to serve them. Following me comes with a cost.”

How can we possibly do it? Well, we better band together, that’s for sure, and we better pray like crazy for help from above. In the end, all it takes is five loaves and a couple of fish and the blessing of Jesus to feed them all. When help comes, and we’re able to respond in safe and appropriate ways, we can make a difference for others. We can be part of something bigger than ourselves. We might even have a moment of satisfaction. And we’ll have our direction: *Fulfilment is making music where God wants us to play!* Amen.