

COURAGE TO GO AND SERVE

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Mark 6:6b-13

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My first year of seminary, I got the brave new idea to volunteer at the soup kitchen for Church of All Nations in downtown Boston. New to Boston University, I boldly embarked on the green line train to downtown and walked to the church from my subway stop. When I arrived early in the morning, the staff quickly assigned me to the kitchen, where the head chef taught me how to make salad. I thought I knew how to make salad; after all, my mom had given me that chore often over the years. But making salad for a family is quite a bit different from making salad for a hundred people who live on the street. The chef patiently showed me how to chop the lettuce into tiny bite-sized pieces so that a guest with even the weakest of teeth could still eat the salad with their soup. Several hours later, our guests began arriving. Now I was assigned to coffee duty, instructed to go from table to table after guests were seated to offer coffee to each and every person as they sat down to dine with us. At Church of All Nations, every person who arrived for soup and salad was treated like an honored guest, not like street people or homeless people, but like guests who had come to dine. Nevertheless, these were not restaurant diners like you might find at Summer House. Some came with large parkas; others with layers of clothing; some came muttering to their own private demons; others came reeking of alcohol; and others came with the smell of life on the street soaking through their clothing. To each one, I was to offer a cup of coffee. My first guest looked up and said, “Coffee regular, please.” I proceeded to pour him a cup of caffeinated coffee, and started to move on. He looked up and said, “You’re new here, aren’t you?” “Yes, I am.” “No, I mean you’re new to Boston, aren’t you?” “Yes,” I admitted, “I just moved here from Indiana.” “Ah, he replied knowingly, you’re going to need *Courage to Go and Serve* – Mark 6:6b-13 – © 2018 Rev. Mary Scifres – www.maryscifres.com

some help. Coffee regular here means coffee with cream.” “Oh,” I laughed nervously, “I thought you meant `not decaf.’” He introduced himself as Daniel, patted the chair next to him and, as I sat down, Daniel patiently began explaining the coffee language of New England. He also explained the difference between soda and pop, and alerted me that I would need to be very strict with Boston waiters and waitresses if they ever brought me the wrong thing. “They love to tease outsiders and make you feel like you don’t belong. You stay strong, and you’ll do just fine here.” With new knowledge well in hand, I began serving the other guests who were arriving, slowly mastering their coffee requests and feeling like an expert as the afternoon progressed. I’m not sure if I would have had the courage and strength to continue serving all those guests that day if Daniel hadn’t invited me to sit next to him and get the instruction I needed to successfully be a coffee server for that soup kitchen.

Jesus knew that we all need help in order to serve in this world. Just like I needed help learning how to make salad for a room full of homeless people and serving coffee to a bunch of Bostonians, all of Christ’s disciples need help to serve, nourish and care for others as Jesus served, nourished, and cared while he walked upon this earth. Even with those first disciples, Jesus knew they needed help; he never sent his disciples out alone. Always, they went in pairs or groups. Always, he sent them in teams. Always he offered a few basic instructions and then sent them on their way. Jesus knows we need help in order to find our courage to go and serve as God calls us to do.

Today’s scripture can serve as our instruction book, offering us the guidance and strength we need to find the courage to go and serve. Jesus’ words to those disciples can provide a compass for us as they did for others some 2000 years ago. “Take nothing for the journey—only

a staff, but no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic." But, go in pairs; go "two by two." This was a risky journey for those disciples, even in pairs, to go with simply the shirt on their backs and a staff to lean on for the long walks, and the teachings of Jesus and the Jewish scriptures in their hearts and in their minds. For any needs they might have as they journeyed through the villages of Galilee, they would have to depend on what they already knew, depend on one another, and depend on the hospitality of those they were called to serve.

On this critical "first" journey without Jesus at their side, they were traveling to share the good news of God's love with others. They were going to share their ministry of healing and teaching with those they met. They were embarking on their own journey of preparation for a later journey to Jerusalem and beyond when they would be going and serving even when their master and teacher was no longer walking and talking and breathing among them as they continued the work he had begun. And so, they went, unnamed and indistinctive. No one led, no one followed. But they did not go alone; they went in pairs, two by two, on the journey of ministry. We don't know just how many men and women disciples went out to proclaim the good news, but scriptures does tell us that the twelve best known disciples set out on this journey. We know some of those disciples well from other stories, but we hardly know the others at all. But who each disciple was is not important; the journey--that's the point. And, each disciple's journey was much like that of the others--a journey of service, a journey of ministry, a journey of giving, a journey of God's love, a journey of risk and vulnerability, a journey that took courage.

Our journey of ministry can be much the same. It's a risky thing to serve, to minister, and to help. And so, our journey that starts with prayer and study, preparing our hearts and minds to

remember the lessons we have learned and the ways in which Spirit is leading us to serve. In worship and praise, we also prepare as we experience the amazing joy of glorifying God and rejoicing in God's love for us. And then we're ready to go and serve, living our ministry in whatever way Spirit leads us to do, sharing that good news with others in whatever way we are meant to do, loving God, loving neighbor and fulfilling our purpose, answering God's call or our "vocatio," as we accept our roles as disciples of Christ here and now.

Answering God's call and serving where we are led to serve can take lots of different shapes and forms throughout the course of our lives. Serving might mean dishing up soup at a homeless shelter; or, it might mean helping Leslie and the Fellowship Committee prepare refreshments after worship or help Ed and Helen with the BBQ on a 2nd Sunday of the month. Serving might mean preaching the sermon, like several of you will be doing over the next few weeks; or, it might mean taking your turn to lead Bible study with your weekly Bible study group. Serving might mean singing a solo or singing in the choir; or it might mean simply singing praise to God with the congregation as we sing a hymn in worship. Every time we walk into these church doors to teach a class or serve a meal or clean a room or sing a song, we are serving; we are in ministry, doing what we are called to do, because Jesus calls each and every one of his followers to serve, to minister, and to be a disciple. And the service to which we are called is not limited to service here at 611 Heliotrope. Every time we walk out of these church doors to smile at a stranger, to tutor literacy students at the library, to help out in a school classroom, to donate our blood at the blood bank, to help an aging parent, to care for a neighbor in need, or nail another nail on a Habitat house, we are serving; we are in ministry. We are the arms and feet that Jesus counts on to bring God's promises to this earth; we are the disciples who

have received the same call and instructions those first 12 disciples received, to teach and preach and heal and serve and care as Jesus did while he was on this earth.

On this journey of ministry and service, Jesus reminds to take nothing for the journey except one another. We actually don't need very specialized training. We need not be particularly distinctive or important. For this journey, we need not have beautiful Sunday clothes, piles of riches, delicious covered dishes, or fancy cars. For this journey, we take only ourselves and a companion or two to give us the courage we need to go and serve where God leads, where Spirit calls and guides us to go.

Yes, we may be afraid. Those first disciples were probably feeling pretty vulnerable and alone when Jesus first sent them. Like them, we may not always understand the questions that our growing faith pushes us to ask. We may not feel equipped to serve where God calls us to serve. We may be nervous about bring our full selves to the table, worried about letting our companions and those we are serving see us as we really are. We we may be rejected when we try to share any of these experiences with others. We may be rejected when we try to invite others to walk the Christian journey with us. We may get tired and worn out, when we give of ourselves to a world in need, for the world's needs are greater than anything that any one of us can solve alone. We may feel sad or even angry when bad things happen, or our serving doesn't work out the way we had dreamed and hoped it would. But in those moments of vulnerability, we need not be alone. We are given the Body of Christ, companions for the journey, this entire church family, to work with us, to nurture us and support us in our journey of ministry. We are meant to serve together, side by side, two by two, traveling the journey of ministry with one another. And in this support of one another, we can find the courage we need to go and serve.

Last week, our youth discovered this truth when they were at Western Regional Assembly. I hope you'll all be here next week to hear more about their amazing experiences, so I don't want to give away any big "spoilers" to what you'll be hearing next week in worship. But I will tell you that each one of our 14 young adults was put into a different work and learning group. They went out and serve around the island, but they never went out and served alone. They studied and prayed and learned at the event, but they studied and prayed and learned in their small groups each day. And, of course, they also gathered as the Community Church youth group at the end of the week for their own retreat and reunion time, re-connecting with one another to reflect on the event and begin deciding how to integrate this new experience and their new learnings into their life back here in Corona del Mar. Traveling across an ocean, staying in unfamiliar places, working on projects they'd never been trained for, and learning from people they'd never met became a bit easier because they were learning and growing and traveling with others, no one alone, everyone with companions for the journey.

And we, like they, when we overcome our fears and embrace the courage to serve will find many gifts as well. We may find that leaning upon the staff of faith can bring us a new understanding of what it means to lean on God. We can find comfort in our new-found trust in God. We can find excitement in our increasing knowledge and faith. We can find real joy in the hope that the good news of God's love brings to all of us.

Like the youth of our church, we old folks can also find new friends as we share our faith experiences with others and travel on journeys of service together. We can find old friendships growing into beautiful relationships we had never imagined. We can find fulfillment and excitement as we offer our ministry to others. We can find new growth and fun challenges as we

experiment with new ministry opportunities.

Whatever we find on this journey together, the most important find of all is finding God and recognizing God's presence in our lives. And when we find God and start going where God's Spirit calls us to go, we become disciples, every bit as much as Peter or James or John ever were. And we, like they, on this journey of faith and service will be given new opportunities to experience the promise of our faith, the promise that God loves us, loves us so much that we are never alone; loves us so much that we are given one another; loves us so much that God is always with us; loves us so much that God's Spirit resides within our very spirits; loves us so much that even death cannot separate us from this love. And if there is one truth that will give us the courage we need to face the journeys of this life – whatever they may be - surely the truth of this great love is that one truth. As we embrace the call to go and serve, God is with us, strengthening us with the courage we need with both God's loving companionship on the journey and the loving companionship of other disciples on this journey. And on this journey of serving as we are called to serve, we *become* the love of God, tangible for everyone touched by our lives. And in becoming the love of God for one another and for a world in need, we experience God's love in a mysterious and profound way. Just as I did when I met Daniel coming for his daily soup at the Church of All Nations, for Daniel served and loved me when I was just a scared coffee servers, strengthening me and giving me the courage I needed to serve and love a room full of guests with a cup of coffee – regular or black. Even as Daniel sat and ate his soup and visited with his other friends, Daniel was somehow at my side, reminding me that regular meant cream and black meant caffeinated, and I didn't feel so alone in that room full of strangers.

So, take nothing for the journey, except a companion or two, along with the companion who is always with – God, strengthening us with love, smoothing our path with grace, and guiding us with Spirit. And in taking nothing for the journey except God and on another, we will find all the courage we need for the journey... the courage of love and grace and guidance.