

5th Sunday after Epiphany – B
LSB #857
Text – 1 Corinthians 9:19

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

A SERVANT TO ALL

Charles Plumb was a US Navy jet pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected & parachuted into enemy hands. He then spent 6 years in a communist Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal & now lectures on lessons learned from that experience.

One day, Plumb & his wife were sitting in a restaurant, when a man at another table came up & said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!” “How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb. “I packed your parachute,” the man replied.

Plumb was shocked with surprise & gratitude.

The other man pumped his hand & said, “I guess it worked!” Plumb answered, “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.” Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man. He kept wondering what he’d looked like in a Navy uniform; how many times he might have seen him & not even said, ‘Good morning, or how are you?’

You see, Plumb was a fighter pilot & the other man was just a sailor. Plumb thought of the many hours that sailor had spent at a long wooden table, in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds & folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn’t know.

At that point, Plumb asks his audience, “Who’s packing your parachute?” Everyone has someone who provides what they need to make it through the day. Plumb points out that he needed many kinds of parachutes when his plane was shot down – he needed his physical parachute, his mental parachute, his emotional parachute, & his spiritual parachute. He called on all of them before reaching safety. How often, in the daily challenges life gives, do we fail to say hello, please, or thank you. We fail to compliment, or just do something nice for no reason. As we go through this week, this month, this year, we’ll do well to recognize people who pack our parachute. Whether any of us recognize it or not, they are sent by God to serve.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, “...I have made myself a servant to all...” Jesus said, “I have come not to be served, but to serve.” What’s your motto? Do you pack a parachute for anyone? Do you overlook those who serve you? It’s not hard to do, is it? We don’t even have to try. It comes so naturally. **PAUSE**

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.” Do you like being a servant? How do you like being ordered around & told what to do? How willingly do you look for opportunities, not just to serve, but to be a servant? There’s a difference, & you can feel it in your gut.

To serve is being asked to usher on a particular Sunday. To be a servant is to usher every Sunday, for the rest of your life. At one church I served in North Dakota, a man named Ernie unlocked the door to the church every Sunday morning. He also shoveled the sidewalk & turned up the heat. Other than summer, that meant he had to stop by an hour early each Sunday.

Ernie understood what it meant to be a servant, as compared to just serving. Serving is agreeing to do something, but you decide when, where & how long. You're still in control. On the other hand, a servant has given up control, & when you find yourself in that position unwillingly, that's when you feel it in your gut. It's not fair. How come I got stuck doing this?

Christians who've been given the gift of serving, choose to be a servant & they do so willingly. They don't see it as getting stuck, & that's a very different kind of attitude than simply choosing a particular time & place to serve. Listen again to what Paul wrote, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all..." By the power of God's Spirit working within him, Paul choose, not just to serve, but to be a servant, & to everyone. Paul did that in order to win more of them over to the body of Christ, to the Christian church that Paul had at one time so vehemently persecuted.

Do you realize Paul is talking about evangelism? Even though Paul's salvation had nothing to do with the Law, to those who put themselves under it, he became as one under the law, that he might win those who put themselves under it.

Paul isn't compromising Scripture through becoming a legalist. He's just walking in their shoes so he can learn how to present the Gospel in a way that sets them free.

To those outside the law he became as one outside the law that he might win them. Again, Paul isn't joining the local anarchy club, but neither does he nag them constantly with the Law because he wants to show them that Christian freedom is not a license to sin. That's a complex passage that you can't just lecture someone on, & expect them to get it.

Paul makes himself a servant to those outside the Law & to those under the Law. He makes himself a servant to the weak & he becomes all things to all people, doing it all for the sake of the news that Jesus has died for their sins, in order to share with them in its blessings.

If somebody's life is so messed up, that they really need the Gospel, it's going to be a lot easier to just yell at them, or lecture them. And to our sinful nature, that is a lot more satisfying. Meeting them where they're at is dicey work because it's tough to know when you've done enough, & it's tough to stop yourself before you've gone too far.

There's a difference between serving & being a servant, & the anxiety we experience when we're losing control tells us so. That's why in the book of 1 Corinthians Paul talks about running a race. "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I... discipline my body & keep it under control..." By the Holy Spirit's power a Christian has ability to practice self-control. That's true even when the anxiety is building during those times we choose to let go of what we desire, in order that we might be a servant, instead of one who simply serves.

In last Sunday's sermon the point was made that all true knowledge reveals itself in service to others. Today's point is, though free from all obligations, Christians make themselves servants to all in order to win more of them for Christ. It's like Paul is saying, "Talk is cheap, & actions speak louder than words." If you want to be an evangelist – be a servant to others.

We are to temper, or balance, our Christian knowledge & freedom with the attitude of being a Christian servant to all. That keeps our pride in check. It keeps our faith in Christ from becoming an abstract & intellectual curiosity which has no impact on how we live.

That is God's plan, & that is why the Holy Spirit must live within us. The straight & narrow is not an easy road to travel. The demands are constant, requiring us to discipline our bodies & keep them under control. Our lives are not absorbed with demanding our rights & living only for purpose of reveling in our freedoms.

The world, our culture, our lives, they change frequently. Ideally, as we practice our faith in Christ here at St. Matthew, we change how we do things in order to 'become all things to all people.' Yet, we don't give up what the Word of God teaches. We only give up what our sinful hearts teach & desire. And so we become servants to all that God might win more of them.

There's a side to each of us that seeks the easy chair, the couch & the remote control. We seek the painless evangelism program that guarantees quick & easy results. We desire the stewardship program that costs us little time or effort or anxiety. We seek the title of Christian without the attendant responsibilities & compulsions to live as Christ lived. Jesus died not just to remove our sins & restore us to some kind of neutral status. He died to make us alive again. In the Gospel lesson, as soon as Simon Peter's mother was healed, she got up & began to serve them. As the 12 year old Jesus put it, when found in the temple, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

Thirteen more times in the Gospel of Luke the word ‘must’ portrays the Savior’s fierce determination to complete His course. You & I have been made alive again, not just to coast through our existence, but to be about our heavenly Father’s business.

There’ll be parched throats, & lungs screaming for air, but so forgiven, so called, so filled, so loved; come what may, we will run the course that our heavenly Father has charted out for us. That means self-denial. Our saintly nature can only be at peace when we are servants, for that is what God created us to be in this life.

Even now as sin corrupts our thoughts, words & deeds, Jesus removes those sins so we can live. Jesus heals the wounds, caused by sin, in order that we might become servants of the powerful & life changing message of Jesus’ death & resurrection. Jesus takes the evil we experience & turns it for good as we counsel & console others going through similar struggles.

Each & every day Jesus is a servant to us as He packs our parachute. Sometimes He does it directly. Sometimes He does it through those around us, friends & strangers alike. How many times have you seen Jesus & not said, “Good morning, how are you, or thank you?” And still the Son of God forgives & continues to work all things together for our good.

No matter how often we fail, He never fails to make up for any of our sins & failures. That is the confidence we have as children of God, & it’s in that assurance, in that eternal life we’ve already been given, that we go forth to face each new day. As the OT reading said, “The LORD is the everlasting God... He does not faint or grow weary... they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run & not be weary...” That is promise we have from our

heavenly Father, & no matter how broken our lives appear, to our sin corrupted eyesight, the reality is far more glorious, far more eternal & far more joyful than we can ever know this side of heaven.

Whenever you find yourself struggling, remember who it is that's packing your parachute. It's the almighty Son of the eternal God, & one day we will all fully appreciate that. Come quickly Lord, Jesus. Come quickly. Amen.

You came to earth, O Christ, as Lord, but power You laid aside. You lived Your years in servanthood; in lowliness You died. You bid us bend our human pride nor count ourselves above the lowest place, the meanest task that waits the gift of love. Lord, help us walk Your servant way wherever love may lead &, bending low, forgetting self, each serve the other's need. Amen.