

“Serving Others”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 30, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Hebrews 13:1-2, 6

John 5:2-9

Summer Worship Series – *A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors, and Ourselves* – Week Thirteen

Jesus lived a life of service to others. Through his teaching, healing, and kindness, he modeled how to use our gifts to see, empower, and free others. Jesus instructed his disciples not to lord over others, but to become servants. This way of helping others transforms the world: both those doing the serving and those who are being served.

The first service we give to our neighbor is to truly “see” them. We cannot relate to, love, or help anyone who we fundamentally cannot “see”. That’s why it is so important for people of faith to acknowledge their biases and search out ways to educate themselves by encountering people with different backgrounds and beliefs; so they can, then, love their neighbor more fully.

The second service we give to our neighbor is to serve them in a way that they will actually benefit from. It can be tempting for us to think we know what someone needs better than they do. Often (back to step one above), we don’t see people we are “helping” as autonomous beings with a right to their own decisions. Christian evangelism has been historically linked to colonialism and rooted in making others like us, or doing what would work on us; never asking the very people we are trying to reach what they need. Mission activities, for example, can be powerful experiences for all parties, but only if everyone is involved and has a say in what happens. When we feel we are “blessing” or “saving” the unfortunate ones with our time, money, and talents without reciprocity, we may not be helping as much as we think we are.¹

The setting of today’s healing story from John’s Gospel is a pool called Bethzatha, near the Sheep’s Gate in Jerusalem. Lying in the five porticos around this pool are many invalids – the blind, lame, and paralyzed. The earliest manuscripts of John do not explain why the invalids are there, but later on, scribes added a reason to certain manuscripts: that

¹ Siri Strommen, *A Curriculum of Love*

people believed an angel of the Lord would come and stir the waters, and that whoever was the first to enter the pool after the waters were stirred would be healed of his or her malady.

When Jesus – likely in Jerusalem for the observance of a Jewish festival – sees a man who has been ill for 38 years lying there and asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” we might expect a resounding “Yes!” Instead, the man replies with a complaint, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

Jesus responds to the man’s complaint by saying, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Immediately the man is healed and takes up his mat and walks. At the end of verse 9, the narrator adds, “Now that day was a Sabbath.” This is where the lectionary passage concludes, but an attentive reader will recognize that this will not be the end of the story. As is always the case, Jesus’ healing of someone on the Sabbath creates problems.²

The length of the man’s infirmity, 38 years, is a curious detail. Like other healing stories we have looked at during this sermon series – the woman Jesus healed of a bleeding condition that had lasted 12 years; the straightening of another woman who was stooped over for 18 years – these are maladies that have endured for a long time. Given the age expectancy of that time in history, maybe the large number indicated that his suffering was all he knew; or showed how unlikely it would have been to get to the pool first when the waters were stirred.

The account of the healing itself is brief. Jesus commands the man to take up his mat and walk, the man does what Jesus says, and immediately the man is healed, able to act out Jesus’s instructions. When we find out, after the fact, that the healing occurred on the Sabbath, it puts not only Jesus – who performed the healing – but also the previously crippled man – who carries his mat – under scrutiny for “doing work” on the day that was designated for worship and rest.³

In our first reading, we hear the author of Hebrews tell his readers to let “mutual love” continue. In other writings from antiquity, this Greek word *philadelphia* meant love for one’s blood brothers or sisters. In the New Testament, however, it refers to a special form of love expressed among members of the Christian community. Christians were known, and sometimes even jeered, because of their creation and maintenance of “fictive kinship.” The practice of referring to one another as siblings – *philia* – not only conveys

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Karoline Lewis, *John* from Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries

the theological conviction that members were all children of God, whom they called Father; it also reflects the reality that many early Christians had experienced rejection from their true kin.

While the command to practice this mutual love is not unique to Hebrews, it is important to remember some of the particulars of the situation it addresses. In Hebrews, mutual love is a shorthand for those practices and dispositions that would preserve and strengthen the community. As stated earlier, in Hebrews 10:24–25, the author hopes the community will stir one another toward love and good deeds. In this sense, mutual love is an important and tangible consequence of continuing to meet together.⁴

It would be inadequate to read these commands in an overly individualistic way, as if they only entail the cultivation of the ideal self. Instead, Hebrews envisions that these exhortations are communal in nature. They offer a compelling picture of what the church might look like: then, yes, but also now; in an age when increasingly large numbers of people doubt its relevance and authenticity.

This is why, for instance, in our mission partnership with the congregation at North Church, we – along with other congregations throughout the Presbytery – not only prepare meals to serve following their Sunday worship, but our members also attend their services, listen to their prayer requests, and learn first-hand about their needs.

It is also the reason why, for our Pass-It-On ministry, we invite and welcome those people who come to the weekend sales to also join as volunteers. In this way, those who receive are given the chance to give; and we, as a church, can better understand what the needs within the community are: we develop new partnerships with other ministries and organizations that also seek to help those in need.

And, ultimately, it is for this reason our Good Futures team is asking for your help in discerning how the church can better utilize our church buildings and property for ministry. Using tools like the I-SPY assessment – walking our neighborhoods, looking to really “see” what our communities are like, and talking with the people we encounter about what needs and opportunities they perceive around them will better inform the ways we focus efforts to engage and remain in mutual love, as siblings in Christ.

When we hear about and look around our world, sometimes it can appear to be like that pool near the Sheep’s Gate in Jerusalem: surrounded by people with so many different infirmities and needs, waiting for an angel to stir the waters so that the healing can begin. We may think that – in the face of so many problems and needs around us:

⁴ Christopher Holmes from *WorkingPreacher.com*

illness, poverty, violence, climate change, etc. – the available resources are inadequate to meet demands; we can get so overwhelmed that we don't know what to do next.

But, like Jesus, we are called to look around us and see where healing and change is possible. In our Hebrews reading, the author commands the community not to neglect or overlook the practice of hospitality, referencing the fact that “some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hospitality for traveling Christian workers and sojourners (or strangers) played a significant role in connecting early church communities; it is a form of love and care that is particularly tangible: providing meals and lodging, welcoming strangers and travelers into families and communities. It requires the communal assessment of resources; recognizing that what we have is not intended to be ours alone, but an expression of mutual love; as we are merely stewards of the food, space, and material goods we have been given.⁵

Jesus shows us what true service looks like. His work is shaped by kindness and compassion. But it also reveals that miracles – or “signs,” as they are called in John's gospel – are a two-way street: Jesus can heal, but only when we desire to be participants in it. True service sees the full human being first and then asks – rather than assumes – what is truly needed and what there is to offer. If we are to be followers of Jesus, we can seek to give in this way by respecting boundaries, both ours and theirs.

Loving our neighbor is a natural expression of God's peace, of the harmony of the Kingdom of Heaven coming here on earth. All of us are called to share our gifts in ways that benefit our community, just as our community should honor and be a benefit to us as well. This is the true meaning of service: a reciprocal arrangement of mutual love which extends beyond the walls of the church to the community, to all people, and to creation itself.

Let us pray: *God of peace, we wish for our lives to be a blessing to others, however they can be. Help us to give freely of our time, talents, energy, and resources. Help us to serve with love and joy. Amen.*

⁵ Madison Pearce from *WorkingPreacher.com*