

As we enter a new year, let's talk briefly about 2019. This past year we've been blessed in that we continue to grow and reach more folk for Christ. We had 87 1<sup>st</sup> time newcomers who filled out a Connection Card. 28% of those now consider Grace their church home. That's exciting because the national average is 6-10% retention of newcomers. We're greatly blessed by the Lord and that reflects on you – that you're committed to make newcomers feel welcomed.

Not only have we seen folk come through our doors, more importantly we've seen others come to Christ. Some followed the Lord in believers' baptism. We launched a new ministry, I-fit (**picture**) to those with a special needs child. Our building is increasingly used by those outside of our church, including the high school and Racine County. We made our parking lot available for a park & ride with Sacred Spaces (**picture**).

In 2019 our emphasis was on prayer, *Going Forward On Our Knees* (**picture**). We have folk available to pray with you each Sunday after the service. Though we still have a way to go and want to continue to grow in prayer and our dependence on the Lord, we're headed the right direction.

What about 2020? This year our focus is: *Carrying Christ's Love Next Door* (**picture**).

Do you know your neighbors? One survey revealed that nearly a third of Americans report that they have no interaction whatsoever with their neighbors. That's a flip-flop from the way things were back in the 1970s, when nearly 30% of Americans reported hanging out with their neighbors at least twice a week. Neighborhood interaction may be higher in a smaller community like ours, but lack of community is a growing problem. And that makes it hard to reach people with the gospel.

There is a continual conversation about the great division and anger in America. We will never reach those we that consider *enemies* with the Good News of the Gospel. And the need has never been greater. We're in a post-Christian age. People are not looking for a church, but they are looking for answers. They have a great need for love, joy, peace, forgiveness and acceptance. The gospel is the answer for this world's needs, for our community's greatest needs. It's not the answer though if we don't share it. Your neighbors, your co-workers need your care and friendship. They need to know you care before about them before you share the only One who can meet their greatest need. Jesus gave us marching orders to reach our world with the gospel. The Great Commission must be our mission!

The need is so great. That was brought home to me last week in a powerful way. I was at Goodwill a week ago and the cashier had this huge silver ring with a pentagram on it. Then, I noticed he had a necklace with a pentagram and I believe earrings with one. I wasn't sure of the significance, so I asked him about it and he said, "I'm Wiccan." I replied, "That's interesting. I don't believe that I've actually met someone who is Wiccan before." In our brief conversation he shared that he'd grown up in church and had even gone to a Christian school, but it "didn't do it for him." He was looking for something, and then he said, "besides that I'm gay." And I responded, "I'm a minister and I apologize. I know that Christians have in the past sometimes been very unkind to gay people."

I had one goal – to crack the door for hopefully another believer to touch this young man's life. Jesus loves sinners. Our Lord had a reputation of being "the friend of sinners." We'll never reach our neighbors, co-workers or family members unless they first believe that we're their friend. So, let me ask: *Would your neighbors or co-workers call you their "friend"?* Then, *Do they know that you know Jesus?*

In a hundred years it won't matter if the Packers go to the Super Bowl or who wins the next Presidential election, or where we go on vacation. It will matter for all eternity if your neighbors, co-workers or family know Jesus, if they've accepted the gospel.

Today we're coming together around this Communion Table because of the gospel, because of God's love for us in sending His Son. It must change us. It must change our relationships. Turn to Philippians 2:1-11 (p. 980).

Steve Cole (**picture**), a pastor in Arizona shared this powerful story. He writes: *"Recently I received an email from David and Denise Moore, who serve with Wycliffe in Malaysia, saying that a fellow Wycliffe missionary's sister and her family had been in a bad accident near Flagstaff. They asked if I could visit them in the hospital and if we as a church could help with any needs. Marla and I went as quickly as we could to the hospital. We found out that the family was on vacation, driving west on I-40 near Ash Fork, when a car in the left lane blew a tire and swerved in front of them, forcing their motor home over an embankment, where it rolled many times.*

*Miraculously, everyone survived, even the wife who was thrown from the vehicle, although she and their son were pretty banged up. They told us how well the body of Christ in Flagstaff had come to their aid. I left them my contact info and asked them to call if they needed anything else, but they said that I was the third pastor to visit them and that the other two churches had already largely provided for their family. They said, 'The body of Christ is alive and well in this city!' (This is where it gets cool!) The wife also told us about an atheist friend of her husband, whom they had known for a long time. He had seen on other occasions that wherever this family went, they encountered other believers who*

*treated them like family. This atheist couldn't believe that even though the family didn't know a soul in Flagstaff, when they had this accident they suddenly had an extended network of people coming to their aid. What this atheist observed is what we see in our text, namely, serving saints.*

When our Lord entered our world He modeled a completely different perspective on things. In coming and dying for our sins, Jesus in essence said, *"The way up, the way to life and fulfillment and joy is not to put self and personal needs first. NO, the way up is DOWN. The way to find happiness is to become a servant and put the needs of others first."* This is exactly opposite of the way our society looks at things. The vast majority of people tend to think that the way up is UP. The way to GAIN is to get. They would think that to do otherwise would be absurd.

As one pastor wrote, **Down (slide)** - *"In the vocabulary of our world "DOWN" is a word reserved for losers, cowards, and the bear market. It is a word to be avoided or ignored....it is a word that negatively colors whatever it touches. We say: DOWN and out, DOWNfall, DOWNscale, DOWNhearted and worst of all, DOWN under.*

**Up (slide)** - *And down's antonym is 'UP' — a word in our high-voltage society that has come to be cherished and worshiped....a word reserved to describe winners and heroes. Unlike the word, 'down,' 'up' positively colors whatever it touches. We say things like: UPscale, UP and coming, UPper class, and UPWARDLY MOBILE. We believe in ASCENDING to fame, money, power, comfort, and pleasure. In our society UP is clearly the direction of greatness. From the world's perspective, it is the only way to go...just as a compass needle points north, the human needle points UP."*

But like a tidal wave, Jesus crashed into our world's way of thinking and flips things. He turns everything upside down by teaching that if you truly want to be great, you must go down. You must descend into greatness. According to Jesus' way of thinking, greatness is not a measure of self-will but self-abandonment. The more you give, the more you gain.

Christians who have embraced this philosophy of greatness, those who have committed themselves to a servant lifestyle have discovered something. Unlike their peers in the world, who strive to be upwardly mobile and end up drowning in emptiness and frustration. Unlike them Christians who are downwardly mobile find fulfillment and joy in life.

They discover that you truly do gain when you follow Jesus' example and give yourself way. They've learned in essence that the way "UP" is "DOWN." The way to happiness and meaning during their time on this little planet is to humble themselves and to put the needs of others above their own. Living this way allows them to experience firsthand the quality of existence Jesus promised when He said, *"I am come that you might have life and life in all its fulness"* (John 10:10)

This morning, as we use Communion to help us remember Jesus' descent to earth to provide for our salvation, I want us to consider this truly ironic principle: You gain when you give. **The Way Up Is Down.** What have Christians who have embraced the attitude of Christ Jesus discovered?

**Christian servants learn that it's actually fun, even pleasurable to humble themselves and meet the needs of others.** One issue of *Discipleship Journal* included an article listing example after example of Christians who have experienced amazing pleasure just in the simple act of giving. It told of a group of girls attending Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee. These students took the time to found a community service organization called *Community Connections* that investigates the needs in their area and recruits student volunteers to meet those needs. They work with the homeless, the elderly, impoverished children - anyone in need. One day a month these girls each scrape together five dollars and they go bargain hunting in consignment shops to find meaningful gifts for needy people. They say that they do this to give the recipients of their gifts a glimpse of the love of Christ.

On one such shopping trip they found a guitar, cleaned and tuned it, and gave it to Roberta, a 48-year-old woman in a rehabilitation center who had told them that she always wanted to learn to play the guitar. Now Roberta spends endless hours learning to strum, "Jesus Loves Me."

One of the girls was teaching a 63-year-old woman how to read. On a Saturday shopping trip, she found a great deal on a large-print Bible and had the woman's name, *Gerty*, engraved on it. When Gerty had learned enough to be able to read her first Bible verse, John 3:16, she cried as she read it over and over again.

On another Saturday the smart shoppers found a slightly used pair of roller blades and gave them to a boy living in a shelter they'd met. The girls report, *"Not only is this project fun, easy, and cheap, but it is very rewarding. Doors open to share Christ just by loving people through the gifts we find for them. Our project has taken us a deeper level in serving people: we have gone from addressing needs to building relationships. And if anything is truly priceless, it's relationships."*

These girls discovered that as Jesus said, *"It is more blessed-more fun-to give than it is to receive"* (Acts 20:35). Then, Christian servants have found that it is not only fulfilling to give in little ways...

**2. They find a special brand of joy in costly sacrifice.** The fulfilment that comes from humble servanthood isn't always fun or pleasurable. In fact, servanthood is often very costly. Christian servants have learned that even if it is, they still experience intense fulfillment that motivates them to continue to be **DOWNWARDLY MOBILE**.

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision (**pictures**), the international Christian relief agency suffered from advanced leukemia. Before he died, he went to Indonesia. As he was walking through a small village, he came upon a young girl lying on a bamboo mat next to a river. His guide informed him that she was dying of cancer and had only a short time to live. Pierce was curious as to why she was laying by this river instead of in a bed in the medical clinic. He was told this was because of her desire to spend her last days next to the river where it was cool and pleasant. As he gazed at her, he felt such compassion that he got down on his knees in the mud, took her hand, and began stroking it. Then, he prayed for her even though he knew that she didn't understand English. When he finished, she looked up and said something. His guide and translator informed Pierce that she had said, "If I could only sleep again."

Apparently her pain was too intense to allow her the relief of rest. Pierce began to weep and then he reached into his pocket and took out his own sleeping pills, the ones his doctor had given him because the pain from his leukemia was too great for him to sleep at night. He handed the bottle to the guide and said, "You make sure this young lady gets a good night's sleep...as long as these pills last."

Now Bob Pierce was ten days away from a place where he could get his prescription refilled. That meant ten painful and restless nights. His humble act of servanthood cost him greatly, yet even in the midst of his own suffering, God infused him with a supernatural sense of satisfaction that he had done the right thing. Bob Pierce provides a perfect example of a servant who, "*in humility considered others better than himself...someone who did not look only after his own interests but after the interests of others.*" Perhaps he remembered Jesus' words in Matthew 10, "*If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is My disciple...he will certainly not lose his reward.*"

Being a Christian servant...following Jesus by taking up our own crosses...inevitably carries a cost. Even when the cost is high, servants know that God can be counted on to bring immense fulfillment to His followers. But you know the main thing Christian servants have learned in their downward "climb" in life...

**3. They find contentment in simple obedience to God, no matter what the task whether it's big or small.** You probably know that John Newton (**picture**) wrote the words to the much-loved hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

Newton once speculated that if two angels in heaven were given assignments by God at the same instant, one of them to go and rule over the greatest nation on earth and the other to go sweep the streets of the dirtiest village. He said that if this happened each angel would be completely indifferent as to which one got which assignment. It simply wouldn't matter to these angels because they know that the real joy lies not in the task itself, but in simply being obedient to God.

Those who love and serve Jesus have likewise discovered that the important thing in life isn't what God has us doing. No, the truly important thing is that we're simply doing what God wants us to do. Experience has taught true servants that when they're obedient to God's leading, the Holy Spirit gives them a quiet sense of affirmation, sort of a "celestial pat on the back." And they live for this, God's smile of approval in their lives. It fires them up and spurs them on like nothing else.

Servants know that someday, when they reach the end of their lifetimes, they'll stand face to face with God. They live and serve so that when that time comes God will say, "*Well done, thou good and faithful SERVANT.....come and share your Master's happiness!*" They believe that God will not forget their acts of service toward others. And He won't!

Hebrews 6:10 says, "*God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them.*" Think about it...what will God remember about you?

Kenneth Leech (**picture**) writes, "*Christian spirituality is the spirituality of the Poor Man of Nazareth Who took upon Himself the form of a Servant. To follow the way of the Kingdom is therefore to follow Him who fed the hungry, healed the sick, befriended the outcast, and blessed the peacemakers.*" Think about it – I'd never want to reach out someday [at the end of my life] with a soft, un-calloused hand-a hand never dirtied by serving-and shake the nail-pierced hand of Jesus."

Whenever we eat from this Table...we remember those hands...pierced for our transgressions, we celebrate the fact that the way up is down. For in Jesus, God indeed came down to our level. He put our needs above His own privileges. He humbled Himself and was obedient even to the point of death on the cross on our behalf.

So how should we serve the Lord? First, make sure that your motivation is right. You serve Him because of His great mercies toward you in the gospel. That motivation moves you not to be lazy, but diligent in serving Him. Serving Christ becomes your passion, so that you do it fervently. Remember that you're serving none other than the Lord Jesus Himself.

Years ago I heard about a successful Southern California doctor who met Jesus Christ. He left his lucrative practice to serve in a primitive 3<sup>rd</sup> world country. His non-Christian partner couldn't believe that he'd do this. On one of his trips

around the world, he stopped in to see his former partner. The Christian doctor was performing surgery on a poor woman in very primitive circumstances.

The non-Christian doctor asked, “Don’t you remember how much you would have made doing this surgery in Southern California?” “Yes, many thousands,” replied the Christian. “Then why are you doing it?” “Several reasons. See her clenched fist? In it there are several coins which she will give to our mission. See those kids in the other room? They will be forever grateful if I can save their mother’s life. But there’s one more thing—I hope to receive from my Lord someday the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

The mercies of God call us to diligent, fervent service for the Lord. Folks, that begins by serving our neighbors and co-workers so that they see Jesus in us. Do those near you, this afternoon in your neighborhood or tomorrow at work – do they see Jesus when they see you?

As Christians, we commit to live “downwardly mobile” lives in response to all that Christ has done for us. We love others because God has first loved us.

And we close our service by inviting you to respond to God’s love in Christ. If you’re not a Christian then we invite you to make that commitment to Christ now.

Maybe you’re here and you feel like you’re headed in the wrong direction in the ship of life. You’ve tried all the things the world has to offer and have discovered that “up” isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. If so, then we invite you today to turn and head in the right direction. Repent of your sins and turn your life over to Jesus so that He can equip you to find the joy that comes from serving others.

If you are a Christian, how’s your *serve*? Jesus came to this world to serve. Do those around you see Jesus because you’re serving them?