

Serving as a Volunteer or Minister?

Acts 9:36-43, 1 Peter 4:10-11

So friends, according to the website volunteer.ca there are 13.3 million Canadians who contribute about 2.1 billion volunteer hours every year.

And these good-willed people help out in shelters, hospitals, charities, service clubs, at festivals, sporting leagues, youth camps, environmental groups, crisis lines, human rights groups, disaster relief, flood relief and so on... and it all adds up to the equivalent of about 1.1 million full-time jobs. (*Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2010*).

That's a lot of work that gets done for organizations and good causes because people are willing to give their spare time and energy and help out in some way.

And the fact is that volunteers are needed because organizations and charitable causes don't always have the financial resources to pay someone to do what needs to be

done, and the people who are receiving their services can't afford to pay for them either. This is why we need volunteers!

For example - there are companies and workers who can go into someone's house after it's been flooded and remove all the damaged belongings and materials and clean everything up.

But we know that when a home owner is faced with the cost of replacing all their belongings and rebuilding their home after a flood, paying someone to come in and do the clean-up for them is not an option.

So we volunteer and to provide services and assistance to people at no cost in order to help them get back on their feet again.

As one person describes it "*Volunteers provide desperately needed human resources to charities and voluntary organizations and the people they serve... they do everything from stuffing envelopes to serving on boards of directors.*

They raise funds for charity, coach sports teams, run youth and children's programs, deliver meals, shop for the elderly, help recent immigrants settle in, work to protect the environment, help feed hungry people, guide museum and art gallery visitors, and build homes for homeless people." (Noah McIntock – Understanding Canadian Volunteers pg. 2)

And so friends - when you look at the list of what volunteers do... it's not hard to see that volunteering is important, that it's very necessary...

That it is in fact essential to the health and well-being of our society - volunteering is a very good thing!

And so as we are looking at what it means to serve others in this sermon series, you will no doubt be surprised to learn that volunteering can actually prevent us from doing that.

Volunteering is good... but it can prevent us from truly serving others, especially in the capacity they need it the most in becoming disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I don't mean that volunteering for other charities or organizations competes with the time you can spend being involved in the church... although that can be an issue.

What I mean is that the essence of volunteering is something very different from what it means to be an active member of the Body of Christ.

When someone volunteers - they give whatever time and energy they have left over in order to do all the good things that volunteers do.

Case in point – every October we used to put up a sign on our front lawn asking people to give back by helping us host Inn from the Cold and I got a lot of phone calls from people who were interested in helping out.

But as soon as I explain that we host it on a week night and go over everything that is involved from Thursday afternoon all the way to Friday morning – ninety percent of them tell me that it won't fit into their work and family schedule.

So you see friends – volunteers give what is leftover, whatever they have to spare.... Whatever they can afford **after** they have taken what they need for themselves and their family.

Now this isn't a bad thing... in fact it's totally understandable, and please remember – I've said that volunteering is good...

And I don't want to prevent people from volunteering their spare time to help out with good causes – far from it.

But I do want us to understand how **volunteering is different from serving others in obedience to the commands of Christ.**

Because friends – if we are going to truly start to serve others outside of our congregation as individuals and as a church...

And if serving in this way requires our regular participation or increased participation in some effort... not only to become trained and equipped, but to pursue our Kingdom Callings outside of the church in society...

Then it's very important to make sure that we don't misunderstand this increased participation as simply "doing more volunteer work at church."

Because if we do - we end up with **Prima Donna volunteers** instead of members of the Body who are ministering according to their gifts.

Now a Prima Donna Volunteer is someone who goes above and beyond in volunteering their time and energy.

They're not hard to pick out either - usually they will make the point of telling you about all the charity work they're involved in, how much they are giving, how it's so important to them to make a difference in people's lives.

They are the first ones to step forward when something needs to be done, in fact many times they'll do things without even being asked, but... there's a catch.

Afterwards they will make you feel like you owe them for it...

Prima Donna volunteers need constant recognition, accolades, and affirmation or they feel underappreciated, unrecognized and if they don't get the attention they seek... they threaten to take their efforts elsewhere.

And aside from the interpersonal problems that Prima Donna volunteers can cause, if they are left unchecked and they multiply – the church will eventually become just another good organization doing good things as opposed to the Body of Christ who serves others as Christ served us.

Now I'm glad to say that this isn't a particular problem for us at Valleyview – but if we don't understand the difference between a volunteer and an active member of the Body of Christ it easily can become a problem.

So the best way to prevent that from happening is to be reminded of this simple truth every now and then – that the Body of Christ - the church - does not have volunteers, it has members... members who serve others.

Say it with me - the Church does not have volunteers... it has members who serve others.

And friends, as members of the Body of Christ who serve others it means **we are all ministers!**

The apostle Paul teaches us that *“if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”* (2 Cor 5:17-18)

Did you catch that? That Christ gave **us** the ministry of reconciliation! The **ministry-** friends... that means we are ministers – not volunteers.

And Paul also tells us *“We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* (Eph 2:10)

Friends – once we experience the saving grace and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit begins work on us... and

He starts to transform us into whatever body part that God planned out in advance for us to become.

Friends our relationship with the Church is not a voluntary association that we get to pick and choose - instead it is the mighty power of God at work in us transforming us into someone who serves a vital role in ministering the salvation of Jesus Christ to others! Amen?

Friends – being part of the church is so much more than attending on Sunday to sing some songs and listen to an interesting sermon, drink some coffee and go home.

Friends, volunteers give what they can out of their leftovers, but ministers are called to contribute their best, their first-fruits to God's plan in this world...

Volunteers can decide to walk away if things get too tough, or if the cost is too great – Ministers are called to imitate Jesus Christ who gave his life to save us, and so we do our best to serve others in that spirit.

But the biggest difference friends is that volunteers do what they can to help people's physical needs...

but ministers - even though they may perform the same action as a volunteer does, a minister serves others motivated by grace empowered by the Holy Spirit and they have the power to meet people's spiritual needs as well.

Do you see the difference? Do you understand why becoming preoccupied with doing something good like volunteering can prevent us from truly serving others – as ministers – for God...

Friends now that the difference is explained to us I want to look at what we can learn from three people in the scripture who exemplify what it means to serve others... as a minister for God.

So let's look at Tabitha first - what stands out most in the text is that she was noted for always doing good and helping the poor – she would make them coats and clothes for them and provide for their physical needs.

But it went beyond the physical with Tabitha because she was a minister - she had a spiritual gift – specifically one of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8 which is called “*Antilempsis*” and it means “a timely act of rescue, coming to the aid of someone” and we translate it as “Helping” - the spiritual gift of Helping.

And she used this gift to do more than just give people clothes it enabled her to minister to their spiritual needs as well.

The evidence of this is that when she died, all those whom she helped came to pay her tribute and they wanted to tell others about what she had done for them.

So friends, let’s pause here for a moment and ask ourselves – what will we be most known for when we pass away? **What will people say at our funeral?**

Will they talk about how much we volunteered our extra time and how good that was... Or will they be sharing about how great it was that their life was changed because you somehow you served by ministering the grace of Jesus to them?

Now there is motivation to be a minister friends! Amen?

Now - the other aspect of ministry we see exemplified by Tabitha is that she wasn’t afraid to **put herself at risk in ministering to others.**

To help the poor in the ancient world meant to expose yourself to people who were sick and diseased – and often contagious.

Now the text doesn’t say anything about how she got sick but it’s highly probable that she did - because of who she was helping out!

Friends, do we hold back from serving others as ministers because we’re afraid of the risks that it might pose? A health risk, a safety risk, an economic risk?

Friends, remember the scripture tells us that “*in all things God works for the good of those who love him*” (Rom 8:28) and

Tabitha's story shows God working a great deal of good through the consequences of the risk she took in ministering.

When Tabitha died, her fellow disciples heard that the Apostle Peter was in the nearby town and they sent for him, why?

Well Peter was known for ministering to people through the gift of healing, and through miracles.

In Acts 5 we read how *"People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed."*

The Christians in Joppa were hopeful that maybe Peter could help Tabitha even though she had died. The Holy Spirit was with Peter in a powerful way.

So when the request comes to Peter – how does he respond?

He drops everything he is doing in Lydda and immediately makes a 10 mile journey on foot to go see Tabitha's body in Joppa.

Peter the Apostle, the one whom Christ has designated as leader of the disciples, the rock on whom He would build his church – this Peter drops everything to minister to somebody who is really a nobody, who is already dead.

Friends this is a reminder to us not to let our blessings or our status go to our heads, it's a reminder that no matter how high we climb, we always need to be willing to minister to people who seem to have no particular significance to us or what we are doing – always be ready to serve the least of these as we learned last week.

So Peter goes to Joppa to help.

And notice how Peter goes about using his gift of miracles to minister, it's not flashy or showy or done in a way that attracts the attention to Peter.

The miracle happens the exact same way it did when Jesus raised Jarius's daughter back to life. People are sent out, there is prayer to God, and then a simple instruction uttered "get up." and Tabitha is restored to life to continue her ministry to the poor.

And Peter doesn't take the glory for it – Jesus does. And we know this because the scripture says that when everyone heard about this – they didn't praise Peter, they put their faith in Jesus.

Peter is no prima donna volunteer seeking recognition for making such a sacrifice of coming down to Joppa and doing this great thing...

Because of Peter's ministry – many people put their faith in Jesus!

Amazing isn't it? The difference between serving others as a volunteer versus serving others as a minister...

But it doesn't end there – the people who praised God for the miracle - they have become new believers in Jesus, and they need instruction and help in their newfound faith.

So, Peter alters whatever plans he may have had and stays in Joppa – he doesn't go back to Lydda.

He stays to help instruct and teach the new believers – and the text says he stayed for some time. Where did he stay? With Simon the Tanner, and here we find more examples of the difference between volunteers and ministers.

In the ancient world tanners provided an indispensable service, but the process for turning animal hides into usable pieces of leather was a very messy, very smelly business - perhaps a bit like running a hog farm or a chicken farm today.

And so - while people benefited from the skills of a tanner, they did not like to associate with them or visit them... unless it was absolutely necessary, and then only for a short period of time.

But Peter stays with Simon for some time...because a minister is committed to overlooking these kinds of things as they serve others for the good of the Kingdom of God.

The difference between volunteering and serving others in ministry...

And this is a great story because it gives us examples of how to minister as a helper, as a leader in the church, and also as someone who is a regular working joe - Simon the Tanner.

We see ministry service happening as Simon the Tanner opens his home to Peter and offers him hospitality and allows him to stay for an indefinite period of time.

Peter is probably teaching classes there, taking up space that Simon would use for his business, getting in the way and underfoot.

But Simon is a minister – he graciously allows Peter and the new believers to stay at his home, meet at his home so they

can receive teaching and grow in their faith... because he knows how important it is, perhaps because someone had done it for him when He had become a Christian...

So... three members of the body of Christ, all functioning in different ways, in different positions in the church, but all serving others using their spiritual gifts, giving their firstfruits – not the leftovers of their possessions, time and energy.

And the result is that Body of Christ is functioning properly and many people are brought to faith in Jesus Christ!

Friends this is exactly what that scripture passage which read from 1 Peter 4 is speaking about.

Peter says *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ”*

That’s exactly what happened; maybe Peter had this story in mind when he wrote this?

And friends as we start to shift our focus outwards to serving others more and more, we need reflect on how we think about our relationship with the Church – the Body of Christ....

Do we believe that this is merely a voluntary association for us – or are we beginning to understand that it's so much more?

That it is part of the most important thing that is happening in our lives. That we are being made into parts which fit together through our faith in Jesus Christ.

That God has specific things he has planned for us to accomplish together, which will last into eternity – when everything else will not.

Do you believe that when you “help out” around the church, or participate in some part of our life together- that you are actually ministering?

Whether you are mowing the lawn, taking a water sample, handing our bulletins, or serving coffee?

And do see how important it is that now that we have become a healthy thriving church, that we shift our focus outwards and figure out how we get out and serve our community, as part of our mission to make disciples?

Friends, remember the church has no volunteers – it has members!

Members who are ministers... members who are becoming ministers... members who are going out and serving others so they may be “*faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*”

So friends remember – as you step forward in the next couple months and becoming more involved at Valleyview, as you personally take responsibility for some of the work that needs to happen – remember you are not volunteering... instead you are becoming the minister that Jesus Christ is calling you to be and has planned for you to become... and that's how we serve others! Amen.