

St. Luke's UMC
January 24, 2021

Becoming: Who We Are Meant to Be
Who We Are Meant to Be: Difference Makers!
John 2:1-11

Well, that picture is coming together. The picture of who we are meant to be. That's what this series is about. IN a time when its hard to count on anything for certain, we're thinking about what can count on as a church. So far we've talked about counting on growing in our faith, helping people connect to God through worship, seeking justice, and today, making a difference.

Now I don't want you to worry about me but during this pandemic I have developed an interest in reading obituaries. I know it probably sounds depressing or morbid, but it actually started out of practical concern. As deaths began to mount from the coronavirus, I wanted to make sure I was staying aware of deaths related to people in our church. So I started scanning the obituaries every morning, and I've come to make some observations about them.

For instance, some obituaries can be quite lengthy listing the many things a person did in life. And some are amazingly brief and you can't help but wonder why. Sometimes a church or community of faith is mentioned but not much more. In fact, I notice how little is said of people's faith lives. Just an observation. Some obituaries you can tell were written with a lot of sadness. "So-and-so was suddenly taken from us..." Others can be kind of humorous. I read one not long ago that began this way: "Ol' Billy kicked the bucked last Wednesday." I am not making this up!

Sometimes certain obituaries catch me by surprise. For instance, last Sunday I read about Wayne Radford who died in Carmel. He was on the undefeated 1976 Indiana basketball team, the last team to have a perfect season in college basketball. I had just missed this in other news and thought, "Wow, what a loss."

But this is something I've noticed all obituaries have in common. They try to capture the difference a person's life made. That with whatever number of years they got to have, whether many or short, you can tell the writers have labored hard over choosing in a limited number of words, this person made a difference. Why? Because it is a human need to know that our lives mattered, that we made a difference with this one and only life we had. This is how God made us.

We see this early in the Book of Genesis in the story of the Tower of Babel. Why did the people want to build a tower that reached into the heavens? ***"So that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*** (Gen. 11:4) They want to feel significant, they want their lives to matter, but this also shows what can happen when that desire gets turned inward. Our desire to make a difference becomes a need to be noticed.

James Dobson tells about getting a call from a custodian at the college he attended. Dobson had been an outstanding tennis player there and won a number of trophies for the school, but years later, the trophy case was cleaned out to make room for new ones. The custodian found Dobson's trophies in the dumpster and wondered if he would want them. Dobson said, "Eventually all our trophies get trashed."

If our significance is based on things that bring us recognition, it's just a matter of time before that will get trashed. So gives us significance in life?

I want to invite you to do something this morning, something that can have great impact on the way you live the rest of your life. I want you to write your own obituary. Someday someone is going to write one, so you might as well write your own. What do you say? Do you list all your proudest accomplishments or positions you held? Is that what will have made your life significant? Or is significance based on something more?

To help with this assignment, before you start writing, let me offer us an example of some people I would say are a good example of what it means to make a difference with our lives. In fact they demonstrate perfectly the point I am making, because we don't even know their names. The only identification given to us is they are called "servants."

They are servants in a home in Cana where a wedding is taking place. Jesus' mother is a guest along with Jesus and his disciples. Weddings in that time lasted for several days. Susan and I are getting ready for a wedding this summer and just a one-day event seems big enough. I can't imagine one that lasted, say, for a week! Well, at this wedding feast the wine ran out, a major social faux pas. Jesus' mother must have been a friend of the host, because she came to her son and said, "Do something." I mean, if you're the mother of the Son of God, you should be able to call in some favors right?

Well, Jesus doesn't give her a very promising reply, but even so, Mary tells the servants standing there **"Do whatever he tells you."** So Jesus told them to fill large water jars, big enough to hold 20-30 gallons each, with water and then draw some out and take it to the steward of the feast. They did, and somewhere in the process the water became wine. When the steward tasted it, he couldn't believe it. This wine was better than what he started with. The servants knew they had participated in a miracle and the story ends saying that the disciples put their faith in Jesus for the first time that day.

Now would you not call that significant? The disciples who would carry on Jesus' ministry, put their faith in him for the first time because of a miracle that happened through a group of nameless servants. There are no monuments to them. Their names aren't etched anywhere. There are no churches built in their memory. Yet the faith that built the church can be traced back to these servants. Why? Because they responded to a simple statement, "Do whatever he tells you." I believe that statement is the key to finding significance in life, that making a difference in life comes down to doing whatever he tells us. I want us to consider what it means to live with such an attitude. And think for a few minutes about what it must have meant for the servants in this story.

First, begin with this thought: **Do What Ever He Tells You...**

Even If What I Am Asked to Do Makes No Sense. The servants would have known what the problem was. The steward had probably already asked them to bring more wine from the cellar, they were running out. They already had to report back, "the cellar is empty." They could see the panic and hear the whispers, "What are we going to do." And now Jesus mother points to her son and tells them, "Do whatever he tells you." And what does he says? Fill the large stone jars with water.

Now if you had been one of those servants, what would you have done? Would you have protested? Would have said, "Listen, I think it's really admirable that your mother thinks you're special, but dude the problem here is not a lack of water. What good is that going to do?" Besides, those jars hold about 20-30 gallons each. And do you remember how many jars there were? 6. So how much water is that math class? 120 to 180 gallons. And there is no running water in the house. There's no faucet. They have to go their water source, probably a well somewhere. So this was no light chore.

Yet, without ever saying a word, they do it.

Let me ask you, does your need to understand a request ever prevent you from taking the first step of obedience? Now before I go on, I can imagine someone listening right now is thinking, "but wait, they were servants. They had to do as they were told. They didn't have the luxury of an opinion." To which I'll admit. That's right. So why do you think the New Testament uses as the most popular analogy for being a follower of Christ the designation of servant? Could it be, so that when Jesus tells us to do something, we don't rationalize, we don't question, we don't argue whether it makes sense. We just do it.

Maybe there's been a huge rift in your family and you feel God nudging you to make an apology to someone, but your impulse is to deny the feeling by saying, "What good will that do?" But God doesn't say, "I need you to understand." God just says, "I need you to obey, and trust what God might do with your obedience."

Maybe you get troubled by a huge problem like illiteracy or poverty or hunger, and you feel God nudging to volunteer in some simple way, but you think, "What could would that really do? Doing that little job isn't going to fix the problem!" Does your need to make sense ever get in the way of obedience?

Many years ago Norm Stuart in our church became troubled over hunger, and felt God telling him to start serving breakfast for homeless people. That impulse made no sense to him. What difference would that really make? Besides, who was he to figure how to feed people, but he said, "I'll do whatever he tells me." So he started this work, and it became a ministry of St. Luke's providing meals for going on 30 years at Fletcher Place.

Martin Luther King Jr once said, "Faith is taking the first step without being able to see the whole staircase."

Do whatever he tells you even if it makes no sense.

But significance also means “Doing whatever he tells you...”

Even if it could be risky. Go back to the servants. They were told to fill the jars with water, draw some out and take to the steward of the feast. What are they drawing out? Water. As far as they knew the steward is going to drink water. What would he think when he does and what could happen to the stewards? They could get fired. Or mistreated. Or screamed at.

Even if they believed some miracle could happen, they are taking a chance if it doesn't.

Have you ever found it hard to obey God because it's risky? That what you feel God calling you to do could bring embarrassment or even humiliation?

You know, we often think of the pain and suffering Jesus endured on the cross but we don't often emphasize the humiliation of the cross. Jesus was stripped nude, in front of the world, with a crown of thorns crammed on his head to make fun of him. This was the Romans' way of humiliating a person who tried to overthrow them. It was a way of saying, “See how wrong you were. You are shamed. You are despised. People are embarrassed for you.” How could you have been right if this is the way you end up? We sometimes forget that the way of the cross involves being willing to be humiliated.

I had a lay leader in a church one time that whenever we dreamed of some bold idea we could do, and someone would say, “If we tried that people would think we're crazy,” he'd respond, “I'm a follower of Christ, I don't have the luxury of a reputation.”

Do whatever he tells you even if its risky.

And here's another. Do whatever he tells you...

Even if You're Not Sure You Believe. It is probably safe to assume that these servants didn't know much about Jesus and most likely met him for the first time in this moment. If so, their obedience couldn't have meant they were expecting a miracle. My point here is simple: a miracle occurred not because of faith, but because of obedience in simple things.

As many times as I have taught and preached this story, I can't believe there is a detail to it that I've missed, but working on this passage this week, something stood out to me I've never noticed before. Right after Jesus' mother told the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” It says, *“Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.”* (v.6) Water for ritual cleansing would have been a common site in a Jewish home of that time. It was required to wash your hands when entering a home. Sometimes a person's feet would be washed by a servant. So in such a large gathering of people it would be expected to see large containers of water for this purpose.

Now, quick side point, this may not be a big deal, but it's interesting that John tells how many jars there were. Six. In biblical numerology six represented imperfection. Seven

symbolized perfection. That's where the expression comes from of being "between sixes and sevens"—between the ideal and the imperfect. Could John be hinting at something being not quite right?

Well, here's the part I noticed for the first time. *"Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.'"* If they had to fill the jars with water, what do we know about them? They were empty.

Now maybe I'm making more of this than was intended by John, but could John be suggesting that for the owner of this house, faith had been a part of this person's life but it had become empty? Think about it for a moment. In the home of an observant Jewish family, ritual cleansing, commanded by the Torah, would have been frequent. If you are hosting a large gathering like this wedding, then surely these jars would be kept full and fresh. But they are off to the side, empty.

Again, maybe I'm making more of this than was ever intended, but it points to something any of us can experience, doesn't it? Our faith can grow empty. We have symbols of our faith. We have the proverbial Bible on the coffee table. It even reminds us when regular worship, and study, and fellowship were part of our lives, but something got cold. Now the only time the Bible is lifted is when we are dusting. We have things that remind us of our faith, but lately that faith has felt empty. With all we have been through, God just seems distant. We don't feel as connected to God as we once did.

If you think about, what did it really matter in the great scheme of Jesus' ministry that he turned some water into wine? So what. He kept a party going for a few more hours. There were probably some there who should have been cut off a long time ago. Just giving a party some extended life couldn't have really been that important to Jesus. But giving new life to a people's faith, now that's another story. Using not just random containers to perform a miracle, but the ones that may have represented an empty faith, now that shows Jesus desire to come into our emptiness and bring new life and connection to God. But we have a role to play. It happens when we respond. When we act on what he tells us to do.

Do you feel you're making a difference? Do you feel God coursing through your veins in what you do? Or have you been a little empty lately? Have you felt you aren't being used? You're not sure why you're here? If you have the ability to draw breath there is always some way God can use you. And the miracle comes, the experience of God's presence happens, *WHEN* we obey is some act of service. God meets when offer ourselves to others.

Let me close with a story about a woman in a past church. She came to see me one day with an idea she had. She began saying, "Let me first tell you a story. I've struggled with depression off and on throughout my life. Years ago we were in another church and I hit a low point. I couldn't even get out of bed. It was my birthday and my daughter brought the mail to me. In it was a card from my pastor at the time." She said, "I couldn't believe

it. He knew it was my birthday! And something happened to me. I got out of bed because I felt significant. The pastor remembered my birthday.”

Then she said, “So, I thought, if it meant that much to me, how many other people would that help. So Rob, here’s my idea.” Now, let me say that at this point I felt some nausea coming on. She said, “I want you to send a card to everyone in our church on their birthday.” I tried not to show a facial respond but it was too late. She said, “Don’t worry. I will get the list from our database. I will personally buy all the cards and hand address each one, and every week, bring them to your office. All you have do is sign them. That’s it.” I said, “You’re on.”

So she did. And I couldn’t believe the reaction I got. People were floored. And every cards or email I received thanking me, telling me what it meant, I would forward to this woman, because she was responsible.

Well, her depression hit again and she got a little behind on her cards. I went to see her. She apologized. I said, “Look, forget about the cards for now. You need to take care of you.” She said, “Don’t you dare. Those cards are the one thing I have that gets me out of bed in the morning. It’s the one thing that makes me feel God is using me.”

I said, “Well hurry up then, because you’ve gotten behind.”