

COUNT ON ME ... TO SERVE

Pastor Jeff Wood

Feb. 19, 2017



Occasionally, airline attendants make unusual announcements. Recently I found these examples:

- Overheard on an American Airlines flight into Amarillo, Texas, on a particularly bumpy day, with an extremely hard landing, the Flight Attendant announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Amarillo. Please remain in your seats with your seat belts fastened while the Captain taxis what’s left of our airplane to the gate.”
- Another flight attendant’s comment on a less than perfect landing: “We ask you to please remain seated as Captain Kangaroo bounces us to the terminal.”
- An airline pilot himself wrote that on a particular flight he had hammered into the runway really hard. The airline had a policy which required the first officer to stand at the door while the passengers exited, smile, and give them a “Thanks for flying XYZ airline.” He said that in light of his bad landing, he had a hard time looking the passengers in the eye. Finally, everyone had gotten off except for a little old lady walking with a cane. She said to him, “Sonny, mind if I ask you a question?” “Why, no, Ma’am,” said the pilot, “what is it?” The lady asked, “Did we land or were we shot down?”

Airlines are part of a teamwork industry. It takes a lot of people, all committed to the goal. If everyone

doesn't pull in the same direction, it affects everyone. You can't have an employee say, "I'm just showing up in body, but not in spirit," or a pilot saying, "I don't really care about safety or timing," or a counter attendant saying, "I'll stand next to you at the airline, but I can't tell you that I'll hold up my end of the load; I can't say, 'You can count on me.'"

I picture churches where each person is saying to everyone else, "I commit to you to be committed," saying to everyone else, "I will be engaged." I won't be a weak link in a chain." You can count on me.

But then I ask, "What would we be saying, 'You can count on me,' about exactly? Count on me to try to keep spiritual growth a priority for me? Not ever to let it go off the radar screen of my life? How would you like to be in a marriage where one person says I don't care about growing? So, us together saying we're going to grow, that'd be good.

Or, count on me to practice a practice that defines us – prayer? Or, count on me to read the Bible regularly? No one would want a colleague to join an engineering department and have him say, "I'm not going to read engineering books very much." Or, count on me to show up at church expectant for the work of the Holy Spirit? Or, count on me to show up at worship each Sunday if I'm physically able? Count on me to consciously work at faith and trust and thanks in terms of finances?

What would all that mean? It'd mean a church of awesome dynamism, power, depth, life, and love! I'm pretty certain that is what it would mean.

Today I want to go over with you why we, each one, should say, "You can count on me to serve, to find a way to contribute with time and energy in my church."

And I want to show you that this is, strangely enough, the essence of our God. Essence. Let's pray.

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:41-45

2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" 10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. 12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he

asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. John 13:2-14

Let me ask you an odd question. It's probably irrelevant to most *normal* people. Sacraments, you know, are done because Christ explicitly commanded them. Do this in remembrance of me. Go into all the world baptizing. So, we have The Lord's Supper and Baptism. We do these because Jesus told us to do these. Here's the question -- why then, if this is the case that a sacrament is something Jesus specifically commanded, is foot-washing ... foot-washing ... not a sacrament? Jesus says if I have washed your feet, so *you should* wash one another's feet.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the upper room on the night before Jesus was betrayed, dial in on the meal and do this 'in remembrance of me,' and now that meal, the Supper, is a sacrament. But John, in that same upper room, dials in on foot washing. So, if the meal of that night becomes a sacrament, why isn't the foot-washing of that night also a sacrament?

Anyone been laying awake at night with this question? I didn't think so.

Just in case you are or ever do, let me offer an answer. Baptism is a washing, Jesus washing us, feet and all, and at the same time, it is a commissioning and an anointing to service. In baptism he saves, commissions, and anoints us to a life of foot-washing like service. We are baptized into the household of faith and commissioned into the ministry of our faith. So, we keep it to just the Lord's Supper and baptism because the foot-washing is *in* the baptism.

But when we see that foot washing has been regarded by some as a third sacrament or that a commission to foot-washing-like service is included in baptism, doesn't that mean, clearly, that serving is important, important, important? Yes, it does.

My friend Jim once said life was rich if it was full of good experiences and my much older friend, Ed, said it was rich if he could serve. He had always prayed, he said, "Only a place to serve." That's what we are talking about ... serving. A life of serving. A bent inside like Ed had.

Serving sounds inspiring and almost romantic ... until someone actually treats you like a servant. Then the gig is over. Have you ever been treated like a servant?

I once was in India and a high caste person treated me like a servant. "Fetch that, boy." I got my back up in a millisecond. Funny thing was that I was in India to serve Indian people. But when I was treated like a servant, the gig was over!

Serving sounds like a good idea until the people who are being served aren't grateful. But sometimes that's the truth, their gratefulness organs aren't working. God loved us when our responsiveness wasn't working so well.

Or it's romantic until we realize we are not talking about a veneer of service, an excursion into service, random acts of service ... but having the heart and character and nature of a servant. Where service comes at us numerous times a day. That this be us through and through.

I was reading a couple of paragraphs of a guy named Fenelon, a French priest from the 17th century. He wrote, "Great virtues are rare: the occasions for

them are very rare; and when they do occur, we are excited by the grandeur of the sacrifice ... (*and*) supported by the splendor of the deed in the eyes of the world. Little things, *however*, are unforeseen; they return every moment; they come in contact with our pride ... our readiness to take offence; they contradict our inclinations perpetually.... It is, however, only by fidelity in little things that a true and constant love to God can be distinguished from a passing fervor of spirit.”

What’s he saying? What Fenelon is saying is that occasional heroic service, especially if others will be aware of it, we are ready for. But the very ordinary, constantly coming at you, the unknown to others, the little ways of service are where the rubber meets the road. And this is what Jesus is calling us to. Washing someone’s head and face is different from washing feet. The service we are called into is the tiny and perpetual stuff. It’s the feet stuff. If your pride argues with it, so much the better. If no one will ever know, so much the better. If you would rather not, so much the better. This is the territory of servants. This is where Christ builds his kingdom.

Christians are to be little Christs. That’s what Christian literally means. (Pauline vs Pauliana) And if the mission statement of his life was not to be served but to serve (Mark 8:34), then it follows that this is the mission statement of ours.

Another place where Jesus’ life is summed up is Philippians 2. “Because he was in substance, God, he did not consider godhood something to be tightly held on to but rather he humbled himself, taking the life of a servant, and was obedient, even to death on a cross.”

Some scholars translate the verse as, “Although he was in substance God.” But many scholars argue on

grammatical grounds for “Because he was in substance God.” See, Jesus showed us the heart of God, and the heart of God is that of a servant. Because that is who God is, that is who Jesus had to be.

Robert Greenleaf is a famous name in the field of servant leadership. Among his writings is a little booklet entitled The Servant as Leader. It isn’t the leader as servant. It is the servant as leader. The essence is one being a servant, and then there are different forms for it to take, like leading. But the essence is a servant. It isn’t a leader pretending to be a servant. It’s the other way around. So if we, being instructed by Greenleaf’s title, looked at Philippians 2, we’d say, The Servant as God. And we are Christians, little Christs. We are aiming to be Christ-like. This is what we are talking about ... an essence of a servant at our core.

Remember how we said that foot-washing is caught up in the sacraments? What’s a sacrament? A means of grace; that is, an avenue for spiritual love, a delivery system for spiritual strength, the gift of a way to put ourselves in the path of God so as to have our lives changed. So they aren’t just commands, they are a way to life. *So we are not only brought to a saved life to serve, but we get a saved life by serving.*

We’re at a time of year when we are beginning to take stock at church and as Christians. It’s important to do regularly. We’re (you and me) taking stock and then making commitments to our church (this church) – in terms of finances, for example, but also in terms of work in the church.

Will you find a way to say, “Count on *me* to be a servant *here*?”

Can you come on Thursdays and trim hedges?
Can you do a three-hour shift at the Thrift Shop? Can

you join the Congregational Life team and call our shut-ins? Can you be an office volunteer? What about joining our Christian Education ministry team? See John about ushering or Dick about doing AV. What about being a handyman on call?

I'm going to ask our elders to stand. Now that you see them, go to them today, this week, and say, "I will join your ministry team." Or jot down on your bulletin your name and a way to serve and put it in the big bulletin basket on your way out.

Jesus is looking at a church, not for its seating capacity, but for its serving capacity. He is looking at a church, not for how many people come and sit, but for how many go and serve. He is looking at a church, not for its space per square foot, but for its ministry per square foot.

Today we stand before one who, with respect to us, said to his Father, "You can count on me to serve." Now can we say to him and his church the same, "Yes, Lord, count on me to serve"?

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com

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