

Experiencing God through Service

Good morning.

I'm here to talk to you today about service on behalf of the church. This is something I believe in passionately, and I try to participate in as many service opportunities as possible – and my point here today is to encourage you to do the same. Service in the name of the church is one of the reasons I love being a member of Fanwood Presbyterian Church. But first – let me take a detour and tell you how I got here.

Have you ever listened in to one of David's sermons, when he talks about some amazing, awe-inspiring, insightful way that he's experienced God? Something that rocked him to the core, where he was left with a knowledge of God beyond a shadow of a doubt? Have you wondered, as you listened, why your own faith hasn't translated that way, and if something is wrong with you or your faithfulness since you haven't experienced God that way?

Yeah, me too. 😊

I've listened to David, and other friends and acquaintances relate stories of epiphanies and generally earth-shattering moments in their lives when they experienced God, and were forever believers, as of that moment – like a lightning bolt hit them, and forever changed them. I'm talking about awe-inspiring stories, so amazing and passionate, and yet.....

...after listening to them, I'll admit I've felt a little twinge of doubt. I've wondered – does this mean I don't really know God, since that hasn't happened to me? Am I not a true believer, because I'm lacking this experience?

And I've come to believe that no, it doesn't mean that at all. My faith isn't any less strong than David's – it's just different. There are different ways of feeling – and demonstrating – God's power and love. We all do it differently, and though my way is different than David's, or yours, or anyone else's -- each and every way is wonderful.

As I thought about all the ways that people know God's power, and His love, and pass it on to others, it brought to mind a book I read years ago, and would highly recommend – The Five Love Languages, by Dr. Gary Chapman. The book is about how to be a better spouse, life partner, and mate – by learning to express love in the way your partner is most receptive to feeling it. Dr. Chapman says that different people feel loved in one of five ways:

1. Words of Affirmation – when your partner tells you loving things, such as “you look nice today” or “you mean so much to me”, you know that she loves you.
2. Acts of Service – you feel loved, for example, when your partner does the vacuuming (especially since she knows you LOATHE vacuuming), or takes time out of his day to help you on a project you've been procrastinating on.
3. Receiving Gifts – you feel most loved when your partner picks a flower for you on his way home from work, or surprises you with a weekend away at your favorite Bed & Breakfast, just the two of you.
4. Quality Time – you know you are loved when your partner makes sure to carve out time every day just to be with you. Maybe it's just to take a walk together, or to decompress over a glass of wine.

5. Physical Touch – love for you is shown through physical closeness – you love when your spouse holds your hand at the movies, gives you a hug as soon as she sees you, or puts his arm around you while listening to the sermon at church.

You may be thinking, “what is my love language?”; or, “what is my child’s?” I have thought a lot about it as well, including contemplating what happens when your love language is different from your child’s, or your spouse’s. I found it most interesting in the book when Dr. Chapman discusses what happens when a “Gift Giver” is married to a “Quality-Timer” – you can imagine that no amount of new clothes or diamond earrings is going to make up for someone always being out of town or spending too much time playing golf. Dr. Chapman’s overwhelming message is that sometimes people have to step out of their comfort zones to give love in the way their partner feels it!

Just as people feel each other’s love differently, and show love differently, there are many ways to absorb God’s love, and to pass it on to others:

- **Prayer** – close conversation with God
- **Regular church attendance** – immersing yourself in the Word on a regular basis
- **Bible study** – reading and absorbing the Word
- **Being outside in nature** – seeing the beautiful proof of God on this earth
- **Evangelizing** – spreading the Word to those who may not have heard
- **Being politically active / having a sense of justice** – trying to make things right in the world
- **Epiphanies** – being rocked to the core by a dazzling moment – maybe even a near-death experience
- **And finally: Acts of Service** – volunteering on behalf of the church, either within its walls (as an Elder, Sunday School teacher or an usher) or outside (handing out meals to the homeless in Elizabeth; raising money for the hungry through the Crop Walk)

The one I want to focus on today is service. The way that I (personally) most experience, and am best able to share God's love, is through service on behalf of

the church. I've been blessed enough to be involved with many activities in the name of this church. Some of them have been in direct service to Fanwood

Presbyterian:

- **Board of Deacons** – where my children and I visited the shut-in members of our church, providing them the week's worship materials, as well company, prayer, hugs, loving touch, and kind words
- **Coffee Hour Host** – making sure our membership has a cup of coffee and a nice treat to enjoy while visiting between services
- **Liturgist / Children's Sermon preacher** – helping David share the week's word, sometimes with the children
- **Usher** – making sure there is order and cleanup to our weekly service
- **Clerk of Session** – brand new assignment, noting the discussions and decisions of the Session, our governing body

And then some of the activities have been brought to me by the church, but have benefitted those outside FPC:

- **Meal ministry at the First Baptist Church in Elizabeth** – this has by far been one of the most rewarding things my kids and I have done together.

Providing a kind word, a smile, (and even once Halloween candy!) on top of the meal they so desperately need is an amazing experience, and one I highly recommend you sign up for, if you haven't already.

- **CROP WALK** – Stella and I walking together, raising money to help benefit those in need, is both fun, healthy, and of course, the right thing to do.
- **Deacon-sponsored Blood Drives** – my kids know that any chance I get, I will donate blood since I'm Type O Negative, which is the Universal Donor. It takes less than an hour and I don't have to put out much effort at all – why WOUDNT I do this? (I do it beyond the Deacon blood drives too.) The kids don't mind coming with me either since they get to snack all they want at the Donor Center 😊
- **Care packages for Haiti** – after the earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010, Stella, Sam and I hit the stores, at the request of the church -- to package up care kits with shampoo, soap, combs, and much more. This was a simple little exercise that probably cost \$50 yet showed my children that we can help others even on our regular trips to Target and the dollar store.
- **We did this again after Sandy hit** – the kids and I went to a few stores a few months ago to round up cleaning supplies for the buckets that David and the church were assembling. Speaking of Hurricane Sandy -

- **Hurricane Sandy volunteer work** – heading down with my sweetheart and pastor David to spend a day mucking out a family’s destroyed home made me feel incredible. The gratitude (and wonderment!) that this family expressed – and that was in their eyes all day long – was proof to me that there is God. At the end of the day we were *exhausted* - but it was that kind of “good tired” that left us feeling warm and fuzzy, with a smile on our faces – you know that kind? Our ride home was just warm and cozy and thoughtful, and grateful. I felt so humbled to be able to help, and so good about this day, that I’m going back on May 18th – will anyone be joining me? 😊

I volunteer in other ways outside the church as well – just yesterday I was at the Westfield Armory along with a few of my friends, selling 50/50 raffle tickets – many of you know, this is where 50% of the sales go to the charity and 50% to the raffle winners. In this particular 50/50 we sold \$1330s’ worth of tickets to benefit The Sandy Ground Project, a group dedicated to building playgrounds along the East Coast to honor the 26 victims in Sandy Hook, CT. It was fun and easy and for a good cause.

My point here, friends, is that just as your spouse or your child might feel your love in any number of ways, so does God. And service - of any kind - reminds us of God's goodness, generosity and grace.

Now I want to pause here for a moment and discuss an added draw of these activities; a side benefit you might not have thought of – and that is, bringing my children with me. Many of the volunteer activities I choose, I choose precisely BECAUSE my kids can come with me. I WANT this for them - they are being raised to be service-oriented (like it or not)! I want to model for them how I feel a family should conduct itself – sure, we can spend weekends down the shore, at the movies, going to soccer games – but we can also devote a little bit of our time to those less fortunate than we are. Yes, 3 hours on a Sunday afternoon does cut into our day – but look what we get out of it!!! (Not to mention, we have the rest of the day and weekend to enjoy!!!) Sure, it may not be your idea of the best time EVER to go visit a shut in, but look how she smiles when we walk in the room, and when listening to you talk about school! And sure enough, my two will complain incessantly leading up to whatever it is I'm dragging them along to – “I

don't WANT to make visits with you today Mommy" or "WHY do we have to go to Elizabeth again?" - but without fail, every single time, I find them more than up for the task. Despite themselves they are smiling, handing out lunches, saying in their most polite voices, "would you like a bag of bread to go with that?" So - they grudgingly find themselves smiling and feeling good as a result of their efforts, just as I do. At first, with the meal ministry in Elizabeth, I was concerned for my children's safety, but Barry assured me that there is always a police officer there and he keeps a close eye on the comings and goings. In all the times we have participated, we have never had even close to a safety issue.

Friends, I just want to reiterate – bringing your children along to volunteer with you sends them a powerful message – they are emulating Jesus.

Remember when I talked a moment ago about people sometimes needing to move beyond their own Love Languages to express love to their loved ones? How stepping out of one's comfort zone may be required for that? Well, I am suggesting that perhaps – hear me out here – some of you may feel the call to step out of YOUR comfort zones into some acts of service.

Stepping out of our comfort zones applies to the church as a whole. This church is full of people with wonderfully various gifts and spiritualities. And we are called to bless others by giving love in ways that feel natural and fulfill us - but we are also called to step out of our comfort zone when the need arises – just as Dr. Chapman suggests in his book *The Five Love Languages*, and as I did with this testimony today.

Friends, the good news is, no matter what your Love Language, God smiles upon ALL ways of receiving your love, faithfulness and worship – there is no wrong way. But I encourage you, if you have been feeling a need to get closer to God and your spirituality, yet you feel reasonably confident you are not going to have an epiphany tomorrow 😊 – **try serving others.** In my experience, lending a helping hand, teaming with others, getting your hands dirty or putting out a few dollars for absolutely nothing in return gives you a glow from within like nothing else.

Thank you for your consideration today.