

“MOST LIKELY TO . . . IV – SERVE”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Memorial Day Weekend

Acts 16:11-15

Luke 3:15-20

If you spend anytime on the internet at all, you, no doubt, have come to realize that the internet knows you. It knows the sites you visit, the things you like, your tastes. Well, the internet apparently realizes that I like happy stories and happy things, because whenever I get on You Tube for anything, a whole string of happy stories will appear on the side of the screen, just begging me to click on them.

And in my weaker moments I do – usually late at night or when I can't sleep. I'll see a succession of videos like babies giggling or kittens exploring or animals being rescued or reunited with their owners after having gone lost. Others that rank right up there are videos of people struggling and overcoming their struggles – like the video where a boy on a basketball team helped another smaller child with developmental disabilities make a basket for the first time in his life! Or runners in races giving up their chance to win as they go back to help a struggling runner to the finish line.

More than once, watching these You Tube videos, tears have come to my eyes. They just make you feel good, and in a world that tends to be harsh and demanding at times, they're a welcome relief, and actually restore my faith in humanity!

But I have to tell you that the videos that are most inspirational are those that show people going above and beyond the call of duty – sacrificially serving and caring for others. They really touch me.

A few of those that made me cry recently. One was a video of a police officer who was working a 10k race, when he noticed a woman struggling to finish. She was last person in the race. Turns out she had lost her husband recently while he was still quite young, and in an effort to make sure her children would not lose her as well, she began a new health and exercise regimen. So she was working on getting in shape and this 10k was part of her plan. But it was turning out to be too much for her, and she was about to call it quits, and the officer, sitting in his cruiser saw what was happening. Well, he parked his car, got out, walked over to her, took her hand, told her he was not going to let her go, and walked with her the last

couple of miles of the race. In the video, you could actually see her countenance change when he came up and helped. Slowly and painfully, she made it to the finish line, to the applause of many onlookers and supporters. Then slowly and quietly, the officer made his way back to his car and resumed his shift. A seemingly small gesture by one person to another, just walking by their side, was actually an enormous, sacrificial act of love and support to a woman who was struggling. It was beautiful to see.

Another video that made my heart happy this week was something that I'm sure many of you saw. It was video of a graduation speech at Morehouse College. The speaker was a businessman named Robert Smith. Like all commencement speeches, it was meant to encourage those graduating, but oh, did it take a wild turn at the end. You see, Smith is a very, very successful businessman, who wanted to do more than just speak to those graduates, he wanted to do something to serve them, to help them have a great chance in the world. So, at the end of his speech, he said that he and his family were going to pay off the student debt of the entire graduating class – the entire class!

He didn't have to do that. They (the Smith family) didn't have to do that. They could hold onto that money, keep it for themselves, continue to fill their bank accounts. Instead, they opened their hearts and sacrificed their own personal wealth for the sake of these young people – that they might have a chance for a bright future. It was fabulous!

Finally, a You Tube video that both warmed my heart and surprised me at the same time. It was a video about someone sacrificially serving someone else – but had a surprise twist in it. The video showed a homeless man sleeping on a bench on a cold night, and while he slept, another man quietly snuck in and tucked a hundred dollars into the man's backpack.

Well, the homeless man woke up a while later and was going through his backpack and was shocked to find the money. He got up, went to a store, and bought things like some clothes, socks and shoes, and then came back to the park bench with his new possessions.

Meanwhile, the man who had secretly given him the money came back on the scene, sitting down on another bench nearby. Turns out that man was doing a social experiment for a college course. Having seen that the homeless man had gone and purchased things with the money, the college student picked up his cell phone and pretended to make a call. He loudly talked, telling his supposed listener that he was in serious trouble. He was totally out of money, couldn't pay his rent, the collection agencies were after him, and he couldn't even buy food for his kids. He said those things loud enough for the homeless man to hear him.

And then he watched as the homeless man got up and took his bag of stuff and walked away. Not too long after, here comes the homeless man again, this time with no bag. He comes over to the college student and says that he had heard him talking and knew he was going through a tough time, and then, reached into his pocket, withdrew the money he had gotten back from returning the items to the store, and offered it to the college student.

The college student was blown away. Never in a million years did he think that was going to happen – but it did. The homeless man’s heart was bigger than his need, and he sacrificially served someone he thought was in trouble.

Oh friends, serving others and sacrificially serving others is a mark of the Christian life. Putting your needs and wants on the back burner for the sake of others in need shows the world that you know what is important, and more importantly, what your faith calls you to do.

Both scripture lessons this morning are stories of sacrificial servants. One you probably know well – John the Baptist, but maybe not so much Lydia. Actually, Lydia’s story is not unlike Robert Smith’s story at Morehouse College. For Lydia, like Smith, was a woman of means, of considerable wealth. She, too, could have kept that wealth and used it to support a life in the lap of luxury.

But her heart had been touched by Jesus, and her faith changed her. So when the Apostle Paul came along and needed help, especially financial help, she was there. She helped fund the early Christian movement, and even opened her home as a house church.

No one expected it of her, yet she did it in such a way, and made such an impact on the growth of the early Christian church, along with others, that her name is one of the few women’s names mentioned in the scriptures about the early church.

Lydia made her mark when she was an adult, but John the Baptist, on the other hand, well, he served sacrificially his entire life. Remember, John the Baptist was the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. And remember that Elizabeth was Mary’s (the mother of Jesus) cousin. Elizabeth was the woman that Mary visited when she found she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, who encouraged her. Do you remember what happened during that visit? The scripture says that when they greeted one another, “the baby leapt in Elizabeth’s womb”? That baby was John the Baptist.

John’s role was foretold even before he was born – he would be the one to prepare the way for Jesus. So all throughout his life, when he was questioned as to whether he was the Messiah, he would remind people that Jesus was yet to come, and he was not worthy so much as to untie the thong of his sandals.

He prepared the way for Jesus, baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, spoke up for Jesus and showed the way of Jesus, and in the end, it cost him his life. He was beheaded by Herod after calling into question the way he was living his life. To the end, John the Baptist sacrificially served the Lord of life – Jesus the Christ.

You know what? John the Baptist's story could have been totally different. Think about it. John was the only child of a couple who had struggled with infertility for years and years and years, and had him when they were elderly. No doubt they doted on him, since he was their impossible dream come true. No doubt he could have easily seen himself as the center of the universe, and lived for himself and himself alone.

Yet, instead he lived to serve Jesus, and ended up sacrificially giving himself for Jesus.

How easy it would have been for both Lydia and John the Baptist to only care about themselves. They both had advantages in life – albeit different ones. But they both could have gone on their merry ways seeking only what made them feel better or accumulate more things or more wealth or more prestige. Yet, they didn't – and why? Because of their love for the Lord.

Friends, we follow in their footsteps as children of God and disciples of Christ. We are called to care for others, to serve others, and when necessary, to sacrifice for others. That's not always easy to do, and in this day and age, our society doesn't really encourage us to do so. Our society encourages us to look out for number one, take care of ourselves first, protect ourselves, keep to ourselves, let others "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps." Maybe that's why stories like I told earlier so touch us – because they're out of the norm in our world today.

But we're called to be different from society – different from our world today. We are called to serve others, even if it means sacrifice - when it costs us, is inconvenient, or moves us out of our comfort zones.

Happily, I've seen a lot of you do that. When you had the courage to face your fears and work at the rotating homeless shelter, or when you took time out of your own personal vacation time to go on a mission trip. Some of you sacrificially serve as teachers – that takes an enormous amount of time and commitment. Others sacrificially serve by singing in the choir, or serving as an usher, or Scout leader, or part of the tech team or parking lot team. Oh, the list goes on and on of those who serve and even sacrificially serve here in this place.

We do it, you do it, for the same reason Lydia and John the Baptist did – because of Jesus. We serve, and sacrifice, because that is what Jesus did his entire life and ministry, and more than that, it's what he did for us. When, by all rights,

he, as the very Son of God, didn't have to do any of that, instead he loved fully and completely, he served fully and completely, and he sacrificed it all, his very life for us and our salvation. As the scripture says, "Jesus came not to be served, but to serve." And so he did, in the most perfect way.

Our calling as his followers is to do likewise. To always have a care for others first in our minds and hearts, and to do what we can, whenever we can, even if it costs us.

So I finish today, on this Memorial Day weekend Sunday, by talking about some who do that every single day, and that is members of the military. When you think about it, that's their job description – serving others, serving us, and being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, if necessary.

So many have done just that, and this weekend, especially tomorrow, we remember that. In a moment we'll sing "The Navy Hymn," "Eternal Father," as we remember. We remember those who never came home, who gave "the last full measure of their devotion" – who gave their lives for the cause of freedom.

May their lives inspire us, along with Lydia and John the Baptist, and all the saints who came before us, to greater service and to sacrifice for the sake of others. But most of all, may we love, serve and sacrifice because of the One who first did it for us – Jesus Christ our Lord. May it be so.

Amen.