**Service According To One’s Means**

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Diversity abounds in types of service and in means just as they do in the spiritual paths with which they might be associated. Just think how the possibilities multiply if we combine ten types of service, means and spiritual paths each. Then change the number of types to 100. I’ll leave the number of permutations and combinations for the mathematicians to figure. Today I will ask you to consider just a few of the thoughts I have had about these ideas since agreeing to prepare this message several months ago. You will be relieved to know that you will not be required to hear all the thoughts I have had in this regard. If you were required to do so, we would have to lock down the fellowship hall to keep you here.

“Service According to One’s Means” fits together reasonably as a title. It also fits with our theme for messages this year “Service As A Spiritual Path”. When I approach the preparation for a message, I begin to list ideas and thoughts that come to me as I focus on the subject area. At first, my focus is on the theme. Then the ideas generated suggest a title. The theme and the title can simultaneously generate more thoughts and ideas that are more narrowly focused on them or, unsuspectingly, become

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broader in scope. As this process occurs, I begin to do what one might call “more formal research”. That research delves into readings, favorite quotes, my life experiences, and the like. Thus, I am dividing today’s message into three parts, service, according to one’s means, and spiritual path. This is an artificial division of these concepts because they are so intertwined in their actual practice.

As noted above, service may come in many different forms. Just a few might be the following, selfless service, service to others, self-service, military service, serving supper, in the service of some spiritual practice, and so on.

I was reading “Markings”, a translation of the thoughts of Dag Hammarskjold by Leif Sjoberg and W. H. Auden. The quote that resulted in an almost physical negative reaction from me was this, “Your life is without foundation if, in any matter, you choose on your own behalf”. If that is true, where, if anywhere, does taking care of oneself fit? I happen to believe that one must serve one’s self, i.e., take care of oneself, at least some percentage of the time. If one doesn’t do that, it seems to me that one will not have the best of oneself to share with others. In fact, one might lose themselves in service to others.

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If I extend that thinking further and apply it to just two people who are partners in life, each would choose only on behalf of the other. Here’s paraphrase of how Murray Bowen, one of the fathers of family systems and family psychotherapy, described that phenomenon.

Think of the self of each of these two people as two circles. As these two circles move toward each other they will begin to intersect and totally overlap at some point like an eclipse. If they stay in this position, the self of each is lost, that is, each is no longer distinct one from the other. Not above below or better or worse, just two individual selves no longer existing distinctly because they are lost in each other and lost to themselves as individuals. My wife and I were married when many people were writing their own marriage vows. This was a long time before we ever heard of Murray Bowen’s theories. Despite that an excerpt of our vows goes like this, “We are two unique individuals joined as one in spirit in our celebration of life.” I guess I am saying that a healthy closeness and a healthy distance both serve their purposes while an individual serves others. It seems to me that this applies as well to the relationship between an individual and the community or any other group or set of beliefs.

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The way Bowen conceptualizes the beginning of this differentiation between self and others is by suggesting that one’s family is the first “community” one experiences. In that family one develops a role that the family expects one to live and exerts “togetherness forces” to keep one in that role. At the same time, in order for one to develop as an individual, he describes a process of “individuation”. Both togetherness forces and individuation have their place. The individual and the family will forever be connected and how they handle the inevitable and normal tension to which this gives rise is reflected in the health of family relationships. It is also the foundation for one to begin to decide what parts of this togetherness process one will keep and what parts one will set aside as one individuates and moves forward in new relationships in one’s life.

Here’s how I see this kind of thinking connecting directly back to service. I believe there isn’t necessarily a balance of service between self and others. I see it more as a proportion that changes as one travels through life. It is different when one is an individual than when one is a partner or a parent or when one is of functioning as a part of the greater community or groups within it. The proportion can change not just chronologically and developmentally, but also according to circumstances.

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The question arises, “What do I get out of serving?” I doubt there are many who would continue to serve others if all they experienced within themselves were negative feelings of anger or total frustration or total despair and the like. Service can generate a sense of fulfillment just because it’s the right thing to do rather than doing it because someone or some dogma told you to or you would feel guilty if you didn’t. I believe this can be done such that one gives one’s all without losing one’s self. In fact, service can and does lead to learning about oneself through “aha experiences” that one never expected.

Here is a thumbnail sketch of the unexpected as it reported by the Elite Daily, a web newspaper and shown on YouTube.

*While the NFL is dealing with the issue of bullying in the Miami Dolphins locker room, a middle school football team in Michigan has a deeper understanding of the game that pros may never reach.*

*The Olivet Eagles football team at Olivet Middle School in Olivet, Michigan, decided to run a play and intentionally not score, all without their coaches knowing.*

*The football team planned the play for weeks, all so they could set up a very special moment for a very special boy.*

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*Keith Orr is a special needs child and his buddies on the football team decided to give him the chance to run for a touchdown.*

*Sheridan Hedrick, a player on the team, would have easily scored a touchdown, but he instead took a knee at the 1 yard line, much to the dismay of the crowd.*

*That was until the next play happened: the “Keith Special”.*

*The ball was hiked and immediately handed to Keith, who ran forward as his teammates protected him from the oncoming defense. Keith scored without a scratch.*

*The boys did much more than help Keith score a touchdown; they brought a community together.*

*“Yes I’m excited and happy Keith made a touchdown, but what have these boys showed this community? That’s what gets to me,” said Keith’s mother, Carrie Orr. They’ve got his back all the way through high school and he knows it.”*

As special as that is, this is what happened next as a reporter interviewed first Keith and then at least one of his teammates.

*Reporter: “What was it like to score that touchdown?”*

*Keith: “Awesome!”*

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*Reporter to Keith’s teammate: “What was it like to see Keith score?”*

*Teammate: “I had a smile from ear to ear.”*

*Reporter: “What did his touchdown mean to you?”*

*Teammate: (with tears in his eyes) I used to think only about myself and my friends. What we did made Keith’s day. Now I want to make everyone’s day.”*

That young teammate asked for nothing and received far more than that for which he could have asked. He learned so much about himself. Also he and his buddies may not yet be aware of how many fears they relieved for Keith’s parents. The means they had and used lead us to our next section.

**According to One’s Means**. Let’s consider some types of means.

**Financial means** are probably the most often noted and, in some cases, quite visible. Foundations, non-governmental organizations, and other types of nonprofits are developed and supported by very wealthy people whose basic needs are a given. People of lesser means need to make decisions about giving such that they are not left too short in terms of meeting

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basic needs. No matter where one is on the financial spectrum, most people find some way to give to serve in some way.

**Intellectual means** are not readily measured. However, we have all heard others or ourselves saying things like,” I’m no good with numbers but I’ll be glad to write up a summary or do a poster.” On the other hand, one might hear,” I’ll do that financial spreadsheet because I’m not really good at writing or speaking.” I realize I may be speaking more of skill sets here, but it basically has to do with how one’s intellect might be used in applying those skill sets.

**Emotional means** may vary within an individual or group. Consider when one is depressed or grieving. One must use ones energy to cope with and, hopefully resolve, that pain. That energy is diverted from the energy available to share with others. On the fiftieth anniversary of President Kennedy’s death, note how a whole nation and the world experienced this process.

**Physical means** like emotional means may also vary within an individual over time or between individuals. For example, my physical means over the last two months have dropped to a frustratingly low level due to my hip replacement. In some cases a kindergartner could’ve done more than I have physically. On the other hand, like MacArthur, I shall return. Most everybody needs to judge their capabilities, function within

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them, and not try so hard that they degrade what they have to offer.

**Amount of time** is similar to financial means in that one has only so much in the bank. We are all familiar with the variation of time available throughout any given year. Life circumstances may render us incapable of sharing time with others where we might have otherwise done so. With time as with other means we struggle with the reality that we need to say no to some valid needs and yes to some others. We cannot say yes to all needs of which we are aware without diminishing our ability to say yes to anything.

**Developmental capabilities** certainly determine the limits of one’s means. If we consistently expect from an individual that which is beyond their developmental capabilities, we doom them to a sense of failure. Certainly there is a need for positive stretching and building that is necessary for growth that may encourage one to go even farther. That is a worthy target.

**Health and nutrition** contribute in major ways to our means. Most of us have experienced negative health issues that have diminished our means to greater or lesser degrees and for shorter or longer periods of time. Few of us have experienced poor nutrition and even fewer have experienced hunger of any significant degree or for any significant length of time. Hopefully, we never will.

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**Quality of means** lends itself almost too readily to judgmental perspectives. One person’s best efforts may be in some way of less quality than another person’s worst efforts. Does that mean the former person’s efforts have no value? Or does it mean that the value lies in one’s doing the best they can? In my opinion, when one shares in accordance with their basic abilities, then that needs to be recognized and appreciated. If a particular task requires greater basic abilities in some way, then that task needs to be assumed by another person who possesses those greater basic abilities.

**Quantity of means** is similar to quality of means in that there is so much variance between individuals and, for that matter, between groups. Some are able to share much more than others for a variety of reasons. The value lies in the fact of the sharing rather than its quantity.

**Individual means** are hard to separate from group means. The fact remains that the sharing of means individually, at times, better serve the needs of the group than a sharing of group means.

**Group means** can accomplish some tasks far more effectively than individual means could. Witness all that we have accomplished in refurbishing this building for our fellowship. I need to note a recent example that wove together both group and individual means. Sometime last spring I began gathering data

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regarding what it would take to resurface our parking lot. With a few brief “what do you think” conversations with others I came up with several basic options regarding tonnage, costs, trucking, etc. That was mostly an individual effort. Then I almost totally dropped out of picture after handing the data over to the board, Ronn, and Phil. A group of people sat down later to decide what we needed and what we could afford at this point. Then Phil took the bull by the horns and ordered the gravel and spread it. As you can see, there are individual efforts woven throughout an overall group process. The end result is a parking lot surface that will serve us well for some time. I want to give a specific thank you to Phil and his skills with his tractor with spreading the gravel. I was not looking forward to spending many hours on the working end of a rake. I am sure there are others who feel the same.

I know that this is not an exhaustive list of means. As I promised, I’ll not exhaust you by adding more. Instead I’ll move on to my last section on spiritual path.

**Spiritual Path** led me to research how many spiritual (read that as religious) paths there are already existing. I came upon lists containing as few as five major religions and as many as 4,300 distinct religious entities. Some were well-defined highways

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including maps with legends telling exactly where one must go and with the correct steps and stops along the way. On the other extreme, there are entities with no maps and allowing one to chart one’s own way as if wandering through the Sahara Desert or Shirley Basin without a map. I decided not to try to find what each of these defined as service. I’ll bet you’re happy about that.

I suspect that if I were to do a search for those definitions, I would find a thread of similarity woven through them all. I say that because I’ve seen a similar thread in a different context. When I was in the Army, I read the Army’s version of Time Magazine. On the back cover of one issue I was struck by what I saw as a paradox. It was a listing of eleven major religions and quotes of each of their versions of the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” My question at the time was, “With guns or with kindness?” Today I would answer, “with kindness” because it fits with the similar thread of service that I mentioned above.

It is almost impossible to use spiritual path in the singular because, as you have heard, even narrowing it down to “service as a spiritual path” allows for many variations or paths. We have discussed the question, “What is spiritual?” many times. Is it “leaving the campground cleaner than you found it and a load of wood for the next party coming in”, letting the other person go first at the stop sign, praying five times a day, genuflecting

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after a touchdown or a man letting a lady have his seat on the bus? To me it can be any or all of those things. Most of all it is a process of how one lives one’s life and may be reflected in individual acts that may be noticed or go unnoticed. The fact of their occurrence is what matters; not who notices. The idea is “It’s the right thing to do.” -not- “It’s the right thing to be seen doing.”

I will close with five quotations:

“It’s not what you gather, but what you scatter that tells what type of life you’ve lived.” Anonymous

“You are responsible for your [emotional] spiritual wake.”

A paraphrase of Susan Scott

“Your beliefs don’t make you a better person. Your behavior does.” Mahatma Ghandi

“Be kind to one another.” Ellen

“If not me, who? If not now, when?” Rabbi Hillel

Veterans Day

Not only do I want to thank veterans for their service and sacrifice, but I also want to thank their families and loved ones for their service and sacrifice. Without their support, our journey would be a lot tougher. In addition, I want to thank those people and their families who have also served and sacrificed while working for peace in nonviolent ways. For military vets, nonviolent workers for peace, and their loved ones, the journey is not one briefly taken in our youth, it is a journey of a lifetime. It is a journey with its lessons in life that we must not forget, indeed, we are unable to forget.

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82nd Airborne Medics

Vietnam 1969