Believe: The Practice of Christian Service
Romans 12:4-6

In his book The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard observes that one of the great tragedies of 20th century Christianity was a new form of evangelism that presented “discipleship” as optional. In the effort to convert people, 20th century evangelism prioritized and focused almost exclusively on “getting people saved.” Any talk about actually following Jesus, obeying Jesus, and seeking to become like Jesus came later, for those who were interested. How many of you know what I’m talking about?

I was a product of 20th century evangelism. From my earliest memories, the highest priority of Christianity as I understood it was always that we, I, all people should repent of their sin, place their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and be baptized so that we might be saved from hell and inherit heaven. I’m still convinced that’s super-important, and I am constantly moved in my spirit to see souls saved and given over to the Lordship of Christ. However, I must admit that learning to think like Jesus, act like Jesus, and become like Jesus was never given the same sense of priority and urgency as getting people saved. Maybe some of you can relate with my upbringing. That means for many of us here this morning, all this talk of the spiritual disciplines and becoming like Jesus might sound like “optional extra-credit” for those who are interested in becoming “super Christians.” But is that an accurate perception? Did 20th century evangelism correctly capture a biblically, historically accurate picture of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Willard insists that we consider what Jesus commanded of His disciples in Matthew 28. Listen carefully for the order of things: “Go now and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded.”

What sticks out to you? Did you notice that Jesus said, “Make disciples…” before He said, “…and baptize them”? And after people were baptized, what then? “Teach them to obey EVERYTHING that I commanded.” Church, Discipleship was never an “optional” add on for Jesus. Discipleship was always the point…Jesus commanded people to “follow me,” and then He commanded His followers to lead others to be followers who obeyed Jesus, not just those who would escape judgment. Jesus was not content to save souls who would sit around and wait for heaven; Jesus was interested in establishing a New Kingdom on earth, which is why He sent His disciples into every town and village with a simple message: The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent!

Can you see that the 20th century (and now the 21st century) concept of “Christians” who are “baptized and saved,” yet have no interest or desire to become like Jesus, is not only a non-biblical concept, it may even be a dangerous and deceptive concept? We really must ask the question, “Can we be saved and still have no desire to think, act, and be like Jesus? Is that even possible?” I don’t know that I can answer that question…though I admit it bothers me deeply, for I suspect that a disturbingly high percentage of “Christians” today live every day believing they are saved, and yet they remain completely content to live a self-centered life with no intention of becoming like Jesus. I don’t know how that works in terms of salvation, but I can tell you one
thing: Jesus said “follow me,” and so that's what I want for my life, and it’s what I want for your life as well.

Now, having said that, I must confess: this business of thinking, acting, and becoming like Jesus, in some ways, still feels new to me! I think that’s because I’m at a point in my life where I’m taking it quite seriously, more seriously than ever, and I want you to know why. In addition to the obvious reasons that my love for Jesus leads me to strive for obedience, I’ve also come under the conviction that truly devoted followers of Jesus are the only hope this world has of justice, transformation, and peace. I am more and more convinced each day that there are no governments, no policies, no degrees, no powers, no principles, no technologies, no quick fixes that will actually bring about dramatic, redemptive, transformative change in the world. There is only this hope: the person, and the group of people, who are growing up into the very nature of Jesus, who have taken on the very character of Jesus, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, now wield the very power of Jesus. Those who, over time, can daily live into The Life that includes generosity, love for enemies, turning the other cheek, serving the least of these, going the extra mile, authentic humility, speaking the truth in love, with the courage, character and wisdom to act and make decisions like Jesus would act and make decisions if He dwelt within their bodies and circumstances. Those people…the little Christs….remain the hope of the world. Which means, if you are willing to join me on this journey, you and I…and those we will disciple, and all the disciples of Jesus everywhere…are the hope of the world. We will be the Light of Christ in a hurting culture so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. Amen? Now, the means by which we grow up into the likeness of Christ…the tools that are provided for us to employ, are those things known as the spiritual disciplines. These are the practices employed by Jesus, Paul, and all of those who have left their mark in Jesus’ name throughout the centuries. In our series called Believe, we have thus far covered the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, Bible-study, single mindedness, total surrender, and Christian community. This morning we will look at the next discipline, which is the practice of Christian service, and specifically service through the stewardship of our spiritual gifts. Again, this is a huge subject, so I will briefly cover this subject under three subheadings: 1) the essential nature of Christian service; 2) discovering our SHAPE for serving; and 3) how to get started.

I. The Nature of Christian Service

There is one word that captures the nature of Christian service better than any other word. Does anyone want to guess? Here it is: HUMILITY. In Philippians 2 Paul writes: Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking on the form of a servant…he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Humility is a tricky thing for most of us. As much as I hate to admit it, my attempts at being humble are sometimes a calculated way to gain other’s admiration for being “such a humble chap.” I suspect many of us have that problem. Others of us don’t even bother with feigning humility because we don’t actually consider others more significant than ourselves…we have no
problem thinking of ourselves as the most significant people in the room! Such is why, even in the church, we often find ourselves in the Gospel text where “the disciples argued among themselves as to who was the greatest.” Whenever we think in such a way, we are practicing self-justification and judgment, and there is no humility in us regardless of our best efforts at appearing that way. Lord help us should we seek to practice Christian service with such a heart of self-justification…we would serve only for our own glory and satisfaction. Unfortunately, I find this kind of “proud servant” to be a common fixture within churches. Listen: true Christian service comes from an honest and humble heart, but where does such true humility come from?

True humility comes from seeing our sin…as in seeing it for just how horrible and costly it actually is. Many of us have never actually looked upon our sin…we are too distracted and amused by pointing out the sins of others. The narcissist would rather die than look upon his sin, and the alarming increase of narcissism in our culture is well documented. But should we actually look upon our own sin…all of it…such that we were horrified and crushed by the terrible punishment we deserve…we would discover a humility that would actually transform our entire personalities as well as our outlook on life.

In the book (that I’m sure you have ordered by now!) *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: To forego self-conceit and to associate with the lowly means, in all soberness and without mincing the matter, is to consider oneself the greatest of sinners. This arouses all the resistance of the natural man, but also that of the self-confident Christian. It sounds like exaggeration, like an untruth. Yet even Paul said of himself that he was the foremost of sinners (I Tim.1:15). There can be no genuine acknowledgment of sin that does not lead to this extremity. If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible. He who would serve his brother in the fellowship must sink all the way down to these depths of humility. How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own? Would I not be putting myself above him; could I have any hope for him?

I want us all to reflect deeply upon this insight from Bonhoeffer, because truthfully, we will never serve the right way and for the right reasons if we cannot find within us this sober humility. A humility that rightly views my neighbor’s honor as more worthy than my own; my brother’s agenda is more important than my own; the homeless drunk on the corner is no more a “sinner” than I am, and God’s love for him…God’s hope for him…is even more important than whatever I’m doing at the moment.

Anything less than this kind of humility may lead us to become the priest and the rabbi who pass by the battered victim on the side of the road because our sense of self-importance blinds us to his plight.

Now, there is another way to cultivate authentic humility in addition to seeing our sin, and it is what Richard Foster refers to as serving in hiddenness. He writes in *Celebration of Discipline*:

*We do not need to go through life faintly hoping that someday humility may fall upon our heads. Of all the classical Spiritual Disciplines, service is the most conducive to the growth of humility. When we set out on a consciously chosen course of action that accents the good of others and is, for the most part, a hidden work, a deep change occurs in our spirits. Nothing disciplines the...*
inordinate desires of the flesh like servicing in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh, we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh, we crucify pride and arrogance.

So…ironically…to attain humility, which is at the true nature of Christian service, we begin by serving, but serving in hiddenness. I find that I must now tell a story that is remarkably ironic…but I do so for your benefit. Several weeks ago I was at the grocery store close to my house when I noticed a woman in a sheer panic. She had a cart full of groceries, but she forgot to bring her wallet with her to the store. She was at her wit’s end, and she was asking the store manager if she might leave the cart there, go home and get her wallet, and then return. I sensed the Holy Spirit nudging me to pay for the lady’s groceries as an act of grace in Jesus’ name, so I did. The lady was shocked, she literally was in disbelief, and she was very grateful. I reminded her that God loves her, and I wished her well.

Now…there were no church members around, nobody that I knew, and the lady did not know my name. I chose to serve her in hiddenness, and in so doing I found great joy because I realized how exhausted she must have been and how much she would be thanking God for His goodness. But all the while, I was tempted to tell people what I had done. I told no one, save my wife several days later, so that she might rejoice in our opportunity to be generous to a stranger in need with the resources God entrusted to us. However, at this moment, I am sharing this story with you, and now I run the risk of you thinking “What a great guy!” Perhaps that is what I secretly longed for all the while…that people would find out what a generous and humble servant I am! But you see, had I never told you…or anyone else for that matter…had my service remained completely hidden…then the crucifixion of my selfish desires for acknowledgment and admiration would have increased my faith in Jesus and led me deeper into the kind of humility that true servanthood requires. I will tell you that I have other stories that will remain hidden, because I do find that God often requires me to serve in hiddenness given that my service to you each Sunday is anything but hidden. By the way, the truly humble person has no problem keeping their service hidden, and no problem sharing about the service they have performed. That kind of humility in service our ultimate goal, but for some of us, we need to serve in hiddenness to cultivate genuine humility where we have none.

I must move on, but I again refer you both to Bonhoeffer and Foster for a much deeper and thorough treatment of this subject.

II. Discovering our S.H.A.P.E. for serving
As God would have it, we are all “shaped” for a certain ministry of service in the church and in the world. Our “ministry” is that thing that we do for God’s glory and the advancement of His Kingdom agenda on earth. Every believer…every member of the church…should be able to answer the question, “What is your ministry?” Now…I suspect that there are many here who could not answer that question, and that’s OK for now! There’s lots of grace to go around here. But, the goal of the Christian life is to identify the way God has uniquely gifted you, the way He has uniquely shaped your life to accomplish the ministry that He planned for you long before you were even born. When we are serving in the way that God shaped us to serve, we will experience
a joy that we can never know any other way. Until we find that “ministry” that God created us to accomplish, we will be restless and unsatisfied with the things of this world. Contentment comes in doing the very thing God created you to do for His glory and His agenda.

Even greater is the joy when we come together as the Body of Christ and serve with our complimentary gifts, each rejoicing in the other’s contribution with joy and thanksgiving. Paul writes in Romans 12: For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

No one has all the gifts, no one can do all the ministry. Every person in the church is uniquely designed to accomplish a certain ministry that no one else can do, just as every part of our physical body serves a unique function. When members fail to do what only they can do, the whole body suffers. However, when we are all serving in the way that God made us to serve, we enjoy all the graces of the Spirit in our common life together. So…how do we figure out what our ministry is?

When it comes to the topic of serving in terms of our spiritual gifts, passions, and abilities, no one does a finer job of helping us understand the concept than our old friend, Pastor Rick Warren. I think Rick Warren’s chapters on this subject in The Purpose Driven Life are still some of my all-time favorites, and so I will refer you to that famous work as a resource.

To the best of my knowledge Rick Warren was the first to use the acronym “S.H.A.P.E.” that stands for 1) Spiritual Gifts; 2) Heart; 3) Abilities; 4) Personality; and 5) Experience…which is an incredibly useful way to think about the way God has SHAPED us for a ministry. Let me review these terms for just a minute as a way of equipping us to begin the work of identifying our ministry of service if we have not already.

**S—Spiritual Gifts**: Spiritual gifts are Holy Spirit empowered abilities that are given to us when we place our faith in Jesus and receive Him as our Lord. Spiritual gifts are abilities that God gives us that we could never accomplish without His power living in us. Spiritual gifts are different from our natural born gifts and abilities, though our spiritual gifts may very well tap into our natural born gifts and abilities to some extent. Some of the spiritual gifts were listed in the passage we just read in Romans 12: exhortation, teaching, prophecy, service, giving, and mercy. Other spiritual gifts are listed in 1 Cor. 12 including: administration; apostleship; discernment; faith; healing; helping; knowledge; miracles; speaking in and interpreting tongues; and wisdom. In Ephesians 4 we find two more gifts of the Spirit: evangelism and pastoring. I don’t have time to unpack each of the spiritual gifts, but here’s what I can tell you with certainty: if you belong to Jesus, you have at least one spiritual gift. That is an absolute guarantee. You may have not yet discovered that gift, or you may have not yet developed the gift that you have; but if you are a true believer, you have been given a spiritual gift…and God fully intends for you to open that gift and put it to work!
**H—Heart:** Here’s what Pastor Rick writes about the heart: The Bible uses the term heart to describe the bundle of desires, hopes, interests, ambitions, dreams, and affections you have. Your heart represents the source of all your motivations—what you love to do and what you care about most. Jesus commands us to love God with all of our hearts, but the way we express that love of God with all of our heart is going to look differently for each person. When you love God with all your heart, that means loving God through that built-in passion that God placed within you. For some of us, that’s music. For some of us, that’s art, or working with children, or teaching, or leadership. For some of us, that’s fishing…which means you are a true disciple of Jesus! We all have something we are passionate about, and for some of us, we are aware of the fact that our passion gets us into trouble from time to time. But remember: God gave you that passion, and He gave you that passion so that you would use it for His glory…that’s part of your ministry! God never asks us to serve in a way that is totally contrary to our hearts; He allows us and encourages us to serve Him with our whole heart…with all of that passion, which means your way of serving God is going to look different than mine. Our hearts are unique, so our ministries will be unique…even if we have similar gifts.

**A—Abilities:** Your abilities are those God-given gifts and talents you inherited at birth. Some of us are naturally athletic, some of us not so much. If you are a West kid, you were born into music…all of our children inherited musical gifts and talents from their musical parents and grandparents. Some people are born with amazing gifts to work with their hands and to build things; others have incredible abilities to solve problems in math; while others have abilities to paint or to cook! If you have a human body, you have more abilities than you could possibly imagine. EVERYONE has abilities. The key is to list and appreciate your abilities without comparing your abilities to everyone else’s. I’ll speak to the danger comparison in just a minute.

**P—Personality:** Believe it or not, your personality is perfectly suited for the ministry God has in mind for you! Now I know you may find that hard to believe, but it’s true. When we look to the Bible, we see many different kinds of personalities. Moses and Abraham were very different personalities. Jonah and Elijah were very different kinds of personalities, as were Paul and Barnabas. One of the key contributors to the uniqueness of our ministry is that we have our passion, combined with our God-given abilities, then our Spiritual Gift that we received when we surrendered to Christ, and all of that will be expressed through our unique personality! Pastor Greg and I have similar passions, abilities, and Spiritual Gifts, but if you hang out with us in the same room, you’ll find that we have different personalities, and so our ministries are still quite unique. Again, it’s not a matter of comparison. It’s accepting the fact that God made you the way that you are so that you can serve the way that you are. God will never ask you to be someone that you are not in order to serve Him…He made you the way that you are EXACTLY because He wants YOU to serve Him as You! Church, it took me years and years to stop comparing myself to Bill Hybles, John Ortberg, Andy Stanley and Tim Keller! I love those guys, I admire and respect them, but I’m NOT them…and that’s OK. God made me to be the redneck philosopher preacher that I am, and so that’s my ministry, and the more I am myself, the more authentic my ministry is received. That’s true for all of us.

**E—Experience:** Everything that has ever happened in your life up to this minute has prepared you for the ministry that God has in store for you. But nothing has prepared you more than those things that have caused you to suffer. Rick Warren writes: If you really desire to be used by God,
you must understand a powerful truth: The very experiences that you have resented or regretted most in life—the ones you’ve wanted to hide and forget—are the experiences God wants to use to help others. They are your ministry!

Many of you will recall…2 years ago tomorrow when the Bohn family experienced an unthinkable tragedy…they lost their 14 month old son, Jude. I will admit to you that it was one of the hardest situations I had ever encountered in close to 30 years of ministry. Jason, Kori, Nora, and Grayson, along with all of their extended family, will carry the pain of that loss in their hearts until they are once again reunited with Jude in heaven, and many of us carry that burden with them in prayer and friendship as Paul instructed in Galatians 6:2. But I want you to know, and Kori has given me permission to share this…that since those very dark days two years ago, God has given Kori a ministry to help others who are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Next weekend Kori will be speaking at our annual Women’s Retreat, sharing her story and the powerful insights that she acquired through that horrible, painful season of loss and mourning…a season that still lingers to this day. Jason has also discovered a new ministry helping teens who are struggling with identity, depression, and suicidal thoughts. No doubt his suffering was also instrumental in preparing him for this important calling.

Listen: God is always willing to redeem and leverage the painful experiences of our lives for soul-encouraging ministry if we will give those experiences to Him in faith. If you are struggling to identify your ministry, begin with identifying your most painful experiences and your worst failures…chances are quite good that there is where God wants to launch your next ministry.

III. Next Steps

I am out of time, but I want to suggest a few next steps. Our team has prepared a pathway for discovering your SHAPE for service and getting plugged into a serving opportunity here at Colonial.

1) Fill out the Serve Profile form and drop it off in the boxes outside the sanctuary. It can be found inside your Serve Finder. (hold it up)
2) Over the next week, take a spiritual gifts assessment – found online at giftstest.com. You will get your results in an email.
3) If you’re having any question about where you might want to serve or what your gifts are, please stay for "Find Your Niche" today after service in Fellowship Hall. Food and childcare will be provided.
4) If you are watching online or need more time, please know the Serve Finder, Serve Profile and Gifts Assessment are also accessible online at colonialkc.org/servefinder

All of us were designed to serve God in some way, so let this service be a part of your spiritual disciplines in the days and years to come. Next week we’ll look at what it means to steward your time as a spiritual discipline. Let’s pray.