

*“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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.” . . . “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”* (Philippians 2:1-4, 14-18, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

In his inaugural address as president, John F. Kennedy inspired children and adults to see the importance of civic action and public service. His historic words, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” challenged every American to contribute in some way to the public good. It would only be a few months later when Kennedy would sign an executive order bringing into being the entity known as the Peace Corps, an idea that had roots in a campaign speech Kennedy made to students at the University of Michigan. This agency would provide new opportunities for Americans to serve their country and their world.

In much the same way, King George VI, the father of Queen Elizabeth, said in his coronation speech in 1937 that “The highest of distinctions is the service of others.” Both these important and influential leaders spoke of service for others as one of the greatest things a person could do.

Before President Kennedy or before King George, an even greater king said something even more profound. He tells us: *“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matthew 20:26-28, ESV)

That ultimately lies behind the words of Paul in our Epistle lesson today. He says: *“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.”* (Philippians 2:3-4, ESV) That is an alien thought to most people today. We may not want to think of ourselves as selfish, but we do tend to see ourselves as more significant than others. And servanthood? Well, let’s just say that it’s good to be the king.

The Saviour, who Himself took the form of a servant and became one with us to redeem us, calls us to be like Him and to serve one another in love. This is something that should be true of each and every one of us. It is also true that Christ has given some in His Church special spiritual gifts of service and helps. Paul gives us an idea of how important these gifts are when he tells the Corinthians: *“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”* (1 Corinthians 12:28, ESV) The greatest gifts are those that work for the proclamation of the Gospel, so that God’s people may be prepared and equipped for loving acts of service to one another. In a very real sense the preaching and teaching gifts are gifts of service and help, because these are given to serve God’s people through the word of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ. While many tend to think of gifts like speaking in tongues as the greatest gift, Paul sees it as far less significant than gifts of help and service.

When I was first preparing this sermon, I had determined to use as my text an example of service in the Scriptures. Right away, I was drawn to a woman named Tabitha. We read about her in the book of Acts: *“Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, “Please come to us without delay.” So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave*

***her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.***” (Acts 9:36–42, ESV)

Tabitha (or Dorcas) was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. She knew the love that the Lord had for her in giving Himself to suffer in her place on the cross, and how He defeated death and the grave through His resurrection. Loved by the Lord, she showed her love for Him in her loving service to others. Tabitha had the gift of helps or service. She used her skills as a seamstress to make tunics and other garments for the widows around her. She also had the gift of charity. She didn’t run a clothing shop; she wasn’t a seamstress for hire. She made these garments out of love and concern for others. Material wasn’t cheap; in fact, people traded in clothing, using it like cash. It is no wonder that her death had an impact on many. As Jaroslav Vajda says in a devotion on Dorcas: *“Her friends were poorer by one good person, and a large quantity was subtracted from the supply of love in the world. The death of Dorcas was a great loss to those who were left behind.”*

This woman, so blessed by the Spirit, did live the words of our text: ***“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.”*** It is no surprise, then, that many came to grieve Tabitha. Yet God had a greater plan. The Lord, who works all things together for good, plans it so that Peter is nearby, and so they sent for him. God permitted Tabitha to be raised from the dead by Peter, to go on serving as a disciple. Her service, her help of others would continue until the day God would call her to rest from her labours in the glory of His Kingdom.

There are many examples in Scripture of those who serve and of those who help. Paul often speaks of those who were such a blessing in his work for the sake of the Gospel. He mentions Phoebe, a woman from a seaport near Corinth, who may have carried his letter to the church in Rome. He says that ***“she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”*** (Romans 16:2, ESV) He is thankful for the service of Onesiphorus, for this man came to him and provided him help when he was in prison. (2 Timothy 1:16, ESV) We can think of the faithful women who looked after the needs of Jesus and the disciples, some of whom also contributed financially to that service. We could speak of the first deacons, called to look after the needs of the widows and orphans in the church so that the apostles could focus on the task of preaching. We could go on with others. How blessed the whole church is through those with these simple gifts! Those with the gifts of service see the tasks that are necessary for the work of the church as a whole. They use their gifts of help to support others in the use of their gifts. Those with these gifts are not looking for praise or reward. They undertake the tasks that many overlook. They see how these efforts support the greater task of preaching the Gospel. Without these faithful people using their gifts of service and helps, much of the church’s ministry would be hampered, or as the apostles said to the whole company of the disciples: ***“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.”*** (Acts 6:2–3, ESV)

Do you have these gifts? Consider these statements: I don’t mind helping clean-up after an event. I am happy helping in a Sunday School class or with VBS, especially since I don’t feel able to teach. I don’t want to chair a committee, but I can type up notes, or fold bulletins or whatever. I enjoy helping out with jobs at the church, even those that others find boring. I don’t want to be in charge, but I appreciate the opportunity to help. If this is true of you, it is quite probable that you have been given the gift of service

Even though there are those with these spiritual gifts, it is important that we all realize that God has called us together to serve one another in love, as Christ also serves us in love. The hymn writer asks: *How can I thank You, Lord, for all Your loving-kindness, that You have patiently borne with me in my blindness! When dead in many sins and trespasses I lay, I kindled, holy God, Your anger ev’ry day.* (LSB 703, st. 1) The Lord’s loving-kindness is made known as He dies in our place on the cross, paying the price for our sins. His loving-kindness is made known in His glorious resurrection from the dead, as He lives to bless us with life, both now in His Church and later in eternal glory. We thank Him by our service to one another, remembering what our text says: ***“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.”*** . . . ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.***

Remember this, too: life is like a game of tennis; the player who serves well seldom loses. Service, humility, sacrifice, and obedience lead ultimately to exaltation. God’s glory is manifest in the world through those who serve in His name, and His church is built up and strengthened by those who use their gift of service for the Saviour who ***came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***”” (Matthew 20:28, ESV) Amen.