

The Rev. Ian Burch
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
May 6, 2018

Several years ago, I was leading a confirmation retreat. It was a great group of kids, and I enjoyed spending time with them. They were mostly city kids, and being at a retreat center with large grounds, woods, and a lake was a novelty they enjoyed. Minus the spiders and lack of air conditioning, I was enjoying myself too.

I try to program some kind of service learning into almost any youth program I lead, and so, I asked the director of the retreat center: do you have any projects that you need done? I have 15 high school kids who have strong backs and no cell phone service. The director told me that the center often hosted weddings to make a little money, and the wedding couples liked to walk the grounds for pictures. Giant trees were always dropping branches and seed pods that marred the wedding pictures. She asked if our group could walk the grounds for a few hours and pick up the sticks.

I said sure. And I proceeded to take fifteen high schoolers out into the heat to pick up sticks. About four minutes into our work, I started to hear about it. As much as I loved these kids, I can tell you they would be winning no prizes for productivity. They mostly moaned about the heat and the back-breaking labor so cruelly forced upon them. I told them if we got all the sticks picked up, we could have a water balloon fight. They were unimpressed with my incentive. Nevertheless, we persisted.

One malcontented teenager, one of my favorites actually, come over to me holding three or four pathetic sticks to show for 45 minutes of work, and she said, "You know, I'm not very inspired." It took everything I had in me not to just laugh. I told her I didn't need her to be inspired; I needed her to be industrious.

Once they realized I wasn't going to cave and that we really were going to work until it was done, they kind of picked up the pace. We cleaned up the sticks, cleaned leaves out of window wells, shook out rugs, pounded pew pads, and oiled all the pews and railings. The whole project took probably four hours, and when it was done, each of the youth looked like they had been worked to the bone like an orphan in a Dickens novel.

I still remember her comment as clearly as the day she said it, "You know, I'm not very inspired."

I think the reason I liked the comment so much is that I related to it. I wasn't particularly inspired either. I had worked forty hours already that week, I was spending a Saturday with young people who were ambivalent about work, and my room had spiders in it. This wasn't a night at the Ritz for me either.

I hope what I modeled for them was a love that doesn't have to wait on something as fickle as inspiration. I hope that all the adults that day modeled a love that showed up for service particularly when it was uninspiring, hot, and boring.

This is, of course, the kind of love that Jesus is talking about in the Gospel this morning. He is teaching his disciples toward the end of his ministry, and he is talking about God's love in a way that might sound foreign to the people hearing it. This isn't the love of the poets or songwriters. It's not candy, and flowers, and affection. Those have their place, but they aren't what the Gospel is teaching this morning.

Jesus encourages the disciples and us to understand Christian love is the love of a mother who gets up to nurse her baby, even though she is so tired she feels like crying. Christian love is the love of a man who shovels out a parking spot for the elderly neighbor even though he'd rather be eating dinner in the warm house. Christian love is the love of a family who stands up for what is right, even when it is unpopular and comes with consequences in the public square. This kind of love is foot washing. This kind of love is dying for a friend. This kind of love is laboring for your community even when it's kind of dull, kind of hot, and absolutely uninspiring.

Feeling love, my friends, is overrated. Doing love, however, is a sacred calling. Not to put too fine a point on it, but following Jesus can be a drag. Take up your cross? Love your enemy? Forgive those who persecute you? What you do to the least of these you do to God? I'm frankly surprised the religion got off the ground at all.

And yet, God came down and took on flesh just like ours to teach us these very lessons. We help even when we don't quite feel it. We stand up for the downtrodden even when it's uncomfortable. And we support one another through thick and thin, even if it'd be more fun to watch Netflix.

You'll notice that the disciples kind of get promoted in the Gospel this morning. They're not servants anymore; they're friends. They are co-laborers with God in the work of healing this world. And, in this story, they are us. We're the disciples right now. Jesus is saying this to us. Jesus calls us friends and asks us to assist in this work. Jesus didn't ask if we felt like it. Jesus asked us to serve.

I think the grace of a life of loving service is this: what might have started as a duty does, over time, change into a joy. I'll be honest: there has been a time or two when I've been driving to a visit or a wedding or an emergency when I didn't particularly want to leave my house. And, without fail, God shows up in spite of my questionable attitude. Christians show up. God shows up. We could get rid of a lot of our prayers and a good chunk of the creed and just say that: Christians show up. God shows up. It is in our nature. It is in the nature of God. Love shows up.

So, if you feel like following Jesus, and it gives you a warm feeling in your heart, I am happy for you and you are blessed. If, you have days where you don't feel like following Jesus, you are not alone. A lot of us don't feel the sublime joy of service all the time either. But I promise you this: show up, and you'll discover that God shows up too. Amen.