

“Why we serve”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*1 Corinthians 9:16-23*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

As a pastor, I see lots of people who come to the church in search of help. Just the other week, we partnered with Calvary Food Pantry to help a young, pregnant woman who had just lost her job pay her rent. Sometimes agencies or just good-hearted people will ask us to help someone who's in need.

I recently heard about one such man who stopped by a church and asked the pastor for help.

“Pastor,” he said in a broken voice, “I wish to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a family in this area. The father is dead, the mother is too ill to work, and the five children are starving. They are about to be turned into the cold, empty streets unless someone pays their rent.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed the pastor. “May I ask who you are?”

The sympathetic visitor applied his handkerchief to his eyes, and sobbed, “I'm the landlord.”

OK, so sometimes people help for the wrong reasons. But there are a lot of people who give without any expectation of reward. Why would they do that?

This is the question that's at the center of Abigail Marsh's research. A professor and psychologist at Georgetown University, Marsh has set out to understand why some people will help, not just their friends and neighbors, but complete strangers, often at great risk and cost to themselves.

This isn't just an academic question for Marsh; it's part of her life story. Because, when she was just 19 years old, her car fishtailed, spun across the highway, and landed on the other side, facing oncoming traffic. The engine sputtered and died. Marsh would have died too, but at that moment, a man jumped out of his car, ran across four lanes of traffic in the middle of the night and rushed Marsh to safety. He never asked for a thank-you, never appeared on the news, never even told her his name.

Marsh would devote the next 20 years to trying to understand why someone would do this.

The church in Corinth was wrestling with a similar question: why would someone risk hardship to preach the gospel? What's in it for them? Do they get to boast? Will God grant them special protections? Is there some kind of reward waiting for them: wealth, power, wisdom, heaven?

Because if there's no such reward, what's the point of making all these sacrifices to serve God and help others?

If that question seems cynical, you need to understand that the Christians in Corinth didn't start out driven by self-interest. When they first heard about God, they couldn't wait to tell others the good news. It didn't have anything to do with them; they just wanted to share that joy.

But there's this tricky thing about goodness: the better you become, the more aware you become of your own goodness. You like that feeling; you want more of it. And you want others to recognize it too, to take note of just how much more sacrificing and generous you are. And suddenly, without you even noticing it, what began as selfless service is now all about you. It turns into awards, and promotions, and leadership positions, and luxuries because you "deserve" them.

This is what happened to the Corinthians, and Paul has to get them back on the right course. So he tells them about why he became an apostle. He says, you have to remember that I was once a persecutor of the church; I didn't start telling people about the love of Christ because of some noble and heroic decision. I started because God intervened in my life; God found me and gave me a mission. It's not a choice; it's a calling. And because it's not a choice, I don't get credit. I don't get to think that I'm better than others. I'm just working with what God has given me.

All that we have—be it our hands to help, our brains to think, our hearts to love, or whatever our special gifts—is from God.

And once you understand this, you'll understand it's not about you. It's about God working through you. It's about God's plan for this whole cosmos, which includes you, but is so much bigger than you.

That's why you serve: because God wants you to turn your creative energy, that divine spark, outward, toward all these other people.

When it's about you, that energy is pointed inward and has nowhere to go. But when it's pointed outward, when you're helping other people, when you're listening for their needs and growing to answer those needs, that little, smudged image of God inside of you is growing also. It's becoming more like God—the One who gave up his very self on the cross, the One who emptied herself in order to create the universe, the One whose love is always flowing out to us.

Think about what a relief that is. If it's not about us, we don't have to devote energy anymore to protecting our pride or trying to be good enough. When we finally stop worrying about ourselves, stop wondering what's in it for us, we also get to stop worrying about having to prove anything. We discover, in Paul's words, a "gospel free of charge." A free gospel is grace that has nothing to do with our successes or our failures; it's not about us; it's about God's love moving toward us and, then, through us.

We have Scouts and Scout Leaders here who serve every day, who build footbridges and pick up trash, who blaze trails and gather food for the hungry, who help strangers and tutor children. You

don't do these things for the Merit Badges, or the Eagle Scout rank, or to get a job or college scholarship. You do them because that's what it means to be a Scout. It means to belong to something bigger than yourself and to serve that with all your heart.

For us, that bigger something is God.

What's really interesting is that Abigail Marsh's research says something similar. You'll remember that she set out to understand what causes altruism. She suspected it had something to do with compassion—this ability to empathize with the needs and feelings of others—but she still didn't know where this ability came from.

So she and her colleagues at the National Institute of Mental Health decided to study the brain images of a very special group of altruists—kidney donors. These are people who underwent major surgery in order to have one of their kidneys removed and transplanted into a complete stranger, who needed that kidney to live. It's so generous that, for most of us, it seems crazy. Why would you do that? Well, that's exactly what Marsh wanted to know.

They discovered that the part of the brain involved with the experience of emotions—specifically the ability to recognize fear and distress in others—the part of the brain we call the amygdala is actually bigger in these people, like 8 percent bigger. Not only that, it's also more reactive to other people's emotional expressions. Their brain essentially is better at empathy. Which brings us back to Paul's first point. They didn't choose to have a bigger and more reactive amygdala. It was given to them. And with that gift comes certain obligations, including generosity.

Now, you might expect that these kidney donors would have inflated egos. I mean, if I did that, I would think I was awesome. I would casually mention it on Facebook and then revel in all the compliments, and be like: yeah, I am a hero. After all, fewer than 2,000 Americans have ever given a kidney to a stranger. But when Marsh asked these folks why they were willing to do this and what it was that made them so special, their answer was shocking.

They said, "There's nothing special about me. I'm just the same as everybody else."

Marsh thinks that this attitude of selflessness may actually account for their generosity even more than their slightly larger amygdala.

She says, "I think the best description for this amazing lack of self-centeredness is humility, which is that quality that in the words of St. Augustine makes men as angels. And why is that? It's because if there's no center of your circle, there can be no inner rings or outer rings, nobody who is more or less worthy of your care and compassion than anybody else."

Marsh points out that most of us operate with us at the center, and then ever expanding circles of family, friends, community, co-workers, eventually strangers. The closer someone is to the center the more important they are. But these kidney donors didn't have any circles. Everyone was important. And Marsh thinks anyone can do this, regardless of the size of their amygdala.

I wonder if that's part of what Paul meant when he described becoming "all things to all people." No longer at the center, he could be everywhere, anywhere; love anyone, everyone. Which, you know, sounds a lot like God. Sounds beautiful. Sounds freeing. That's why we serve. Because when we serve, we get to step outside of ourselves, and for a moment, experience the limitless grace of God. That's better than any reward. **Amen.**