

Diakonia

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on May 8, 2022, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: Psalm 23 and Acts 9:32-42
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Every time I read about Jesus and the disciples in the gospels, I begin to wonder if Jesus choose those disciples wisely. He teaches them over and over about the Kin-dom of God, and over and over, they just don't seem to get it. He drops big hints about what's going to happen to him, and they just don't seem to take the hint. Instead of paying attention to him, they sometimes squabble among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. And in Mark's gospel, at least in some translations, Jesus comes right out and says to them, in exasperation, "Are you still so dull?"¹

We often assume that the disciple first known as Simon is given the nickname "Peter"—the rock—by Jesus because he's steady and sturdy and "solid as a rock," but one does wonder sometimes if Jesus calls him that because his skull is as thick as a rock. By the end of all four of the gospels, Peter, Jesus's closest disciple, denies Jesus, shows skepticism about the resurrection, or is just not present. In John's gospel he doesn't know quite what to do next, and so he goes fishing.

So it's always a pleasant surprise to turn to the Acts of the Apostles and read how the disciples—who are now called apostles—begin to build the church in the early years after Jesus. After some trauma and confusion, they come together, select a new guy to replace Judas, and get busy building the Kin-dom. Their message spreads rapidly, and their community grows exponentially. Peter, who appears so confused and traumatized at the end of the gospels, truly begins to live into his calling as the rock upon which the church is built.

Today's sermon is the second in a series about the five ancient vocations of the church—all known by their Greek names as they first appeared in the New Testament—and thinking about how we can live into these callings now, as people of the 21st century. Last week, Pastor Jeff talked about *kerygma*, which translates as "proclamation." The followers of the ancient church had good news to declare to the world, and so do we. We live out that ancient vocation when we share God's love in our modern world.

Today, we're studying the ancient vocation of *diakonia*. Unlike last week's word, which doesn't look like anything in English, you might actually recognize this one because we have similar English words that we've derived from this Greek one: from *diakonia* we get the words "diaconate," "diaconal," and "deacon." We don't really use the word "deacon" in this church community, but if you grew up in the church or have experience with other faith communities besides Niles Discovery Church, you might be familiar with the word and the role that a deacon plays in the church. Essentially, a deacon is one who serves, and a diaconal ministry is a ministry of service. That ministry might be within the church—for example, in some communities,

¹ Mark 7:17 (NIV), among others.

deacons are the ones who prepare and serve communion—or it might be a serving ministry beyond the church, one who serves in tending the sick, visiting the homebound, or feeding the hungry.

We may have a bit of baggage to unpack about the word *diakonia*, or service. I think for some we associate service with those who have particular roles in the church—with ministers or deacons, say—but the vocation of *diakonia* does not reside with a handful of individuals. Service is the work of the whole community, not just a chosen few.

We also may carry some associations with serving that are negative, since our society tends to think of service as being done by those who are *subservient*. We want neither to have servants nor to be servants.

But *diakonia* is not about servitude. It's a rich term, used in many ways throughout the New Testament. It's used at least 34 times in the gospels, Acts, and the epistles, and is translated variously as “ministry,” “service,” “relief,” or “support,” depending on the context. It's used to describe Martha serving in the kitchen while Jesus instructs the disciples, it's used to refer to monetary support for famine relief in Acts, and in Romans, Paul uses it to talk about service as one of the spiritual gifts.

Even when the word *diakonia* is not used specifically, we see further examples of the concept of service throughout the New Testament as both Jesus and the early Christians offer service to each other and to those outside their community.

In fact, if you look at the ministry of Jesus, we see it develop primarily in two ways: through teaching (which we'll talk about next week) and through service, which comes in the form of miracles. If we look closely at those miracles, a pattern and an emphasis begin to emerge.

People who count up things like this have decided that there are 37 miracles that Jesus performs across the four gospels. Some of them only appear in one gospel, like the turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, some of them are in two or three, and only one miracle appears in all four: the feeding of the multitudes.

Of those 37 miracles, 28 of them are miracles where Jesus performs a healing. He either heals someone bodily, from a disease or ailment or affliction their suffering, or he heals them spiritually, by casting out demons or evil spirits, or he heals them by resuscitating them after they've died. If we consider that feeding is a type of healing as well—healing people from hunger—then 30, or 80%, of those 37 miracles are related to healing. Jesus's primary ministry—his *diakonia*, is one of healing.

And this ministry of healing continues in the Acts of the Apostles. Sometimes Acts refers vaguely to the apostles doing many “wonders and signs,” but many times, as we see in our text from Acts 9 today, the apostles carry on the service ministry of Jesus. The healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha echo similar stories of Jesus healing a paralytic and raising a young girl from the dead in the gospels. It's obvious that Peter has lived into the calling that Jesus offered him, and is carrying on the ministry of service that Jesus began.

We modern, progressive Christians tend to get a bit squirrely when we start examining biblical miracles up close. With our scientifically-trained brains and our generally skeptical approach to scripture, we just find it hard to “believe” in miracles. Me, too—but I *do* believe in healing. And I believe that we are called, just like Jesus and the apostles, to a ministry of healing in our own time.

When we look at the people to whom Jesus offered healing, we see all sorts of people. Some of them were wealthy, but the vast majority were people on the margins, people who were oppressed by a colonizing empire, people who had no money to pay for remedies for the ailments they had, people who worked hard all day and still could barely feed their families, people who were marginally housed, or not house at all, people who were ostracized because of a disease, or just because of who they were. The world hasn’t changed much, has it? We still live in a world of oppression and marginalization, where people are hungry or unhoused or lonely or sick or frightened or in pain, and what’s more, the very earth herself is crying out to us for healing.

What does a healing ministry look like for us today? I believe it looks a bit like a little free pantry in a battered Rubbermaid closet out in our parking lot, that miraculously always has food in it, as neighbors take what they need, and give what they can.

It looks a bit like pile of homemade ditty bags, lovingly filled with toiletries for strangers who will arrive at a domestic violence shelter with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

It looks a bit like a one-person greeting card ministry, in which a message of encouragement and love for those who are ill or lonely or grieving unexpectedly arrives in the mailbox of the members of this church.

It looks a bit like a group of people who faithfully welcome unsheltered folks living in their cars every evening and send them off every morning with breakfast and lunch.

It looks a bit like a community who advocates for a housing navigation center despite intense neighborhood opposition, and who makes sure that the residents of that center have warm gifts for the holidays.

It looks a bit like a community committed to advocating for an end to fossil fuel use, all while planting trees and diligently recycling and composting as a spiritual practice.

Taking on the healing ministry of Jesus doesn’t require working miracles—or even believing in them. It doesn’t require us to do the impossible, even though the problems of the world seem insurmountable. It merely requires us to say yes to service, not out of guilt, but out of compassion and grace, and out of gratitude for the many gifts of healing we ourselves have received. Amen.