

Today we continue our series on the church as both a place and a people.
So far we have seen church as people
designed for worship,
encouraged to be disciples,
passionate about prayer,
filled with the Spirit,
part of God's family,
people who share Good News
and today we're thinking about being people who serve others.

George Bernard Shaw said:

"This is the true joy in life - being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. Being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

We live in a society which encourages people to be very focussed on themselves and their own needs. The problem is that can very easily become self-defeating because the more you do that, the more you will become ***a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances*** complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. Counsellors are supposed to say, "What you need is therapy. What you need is unconditional love. What you need is some me-time. Try some retail therapy."

Sometimes all of those are true. Sometimes we need to go over our problems. Sometimes we need to talk through our unhappiness. But there is also a time to stop complaining.

I think our touchy-feely, therapeutic, blame it on the way you were raised society isn't doing us any favours. People pursue peace and happiness, because they think these are things that can be pursued. They don't realize that peace and happiness, rather than being something we can pursue, are instead by-products that come when we get a life – when we step out of ourselves and embrace life that goes beyond our own.

I want to look at a few texts that will move us in this direction, because we have the weight of society moving in the other direction. We live in a world that tells us to focus more on us – that the reason we're unhappy is because we don't pay enough attention to ourselves. Of course we often don't notice that in telling us this, they

then conveniently offer the solution for us, which just happens to be the use of one of their products, available for just £9.95.

I think Shaw was right - Serving is the door to real life. It's the door to joy and lightheartedness. It's the door to contentment and peace. It's the door to abundant life – and it is following Jesus' example:

Philippians 2:5-7 *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

Jesus' life was one of obedience to his Father and his death on the cross was the ultimate act of servanthood – in the Garden of Gethsemane he asked the Father to take away what he knew was coming but he still chose to be obedient because he knew that was the only way sin could be dealt with and people could be restored to God.

John 10:10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Jesus came to give us life – better, fuller and more blessed than we ever imagined.

John 8:35-36 *Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

A life of freedom sounds like an abundant life to me. A life where we are free is certainly better than a life where we are enslaved, isn't it? When we are free we get to experience more life, more vitality, more of all that life has to offer. Slavery means what? It means a life of being condemned.

Jesus said he came to bring abundant life. Jesus said that he came to bring freedom. Without freedom, abundant life is not possible. So we have to think about what freedom really is.

1 Corinthians 6:12 *Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims.*

There is a kind of slavery that comes from the incessant pursuing of our own interests. Ironically, as we exercise our freedom to seek more and more to meet our own needs, we become less and less free. And as we become less free, life becomes

less abundant. Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean it's spiritually appropriate. In other words, we are not to use "because I can" as a way of justifying what we do.

Romans 6:16 *Don't you know that you are slaves of anyone you obey? You can be slaves of sin and die, or you can be obedient slaves of God and be acceptable to him.*

You can tell the difference between true and false freedom in their consequences.

- True freedom leads to increasing life and more freedom. More peace, more contentment, more connection, more joy.
- False freedom leads to decreasing life and less freedom. More depression, more guilt, more regret, more anxiety.

The message of the gospel IS freedom, and the gospel should free us not only from a past life of sin, but into increasing freedom.

Galatians 5:13-15 (MSG) *It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows.*

14 For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom.

15 If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

How does freedom grow? Well, first of all, it does not grow through doing whatever we want. Paul said this in our Romans passage, and merely repeats the same idea here in Galatians. He says, "Yes, you have freedom to do whatever you want, but eventually that will destroy all of you, so what kind of freedom is that?" And then Paul says something extraordinary –

"Use your freedom to serve one another" – that's how freedom grows. Paul says, serve one another in love because that's how freedom grows, in other words, that is an exercise of your freedom that will lead to more freedom.

Paul says serving others always leads to more freedom. So if you want your freedom to increase this morning, get going with serving! Get into a place of service.

Depression isn't freedom, it's constriction.

Anxiety isn't freedom, it's constriction.

Guilt isn't freedom, it's constriction.

Anger isn't freedom, it's constriction.

Bitterness and being critical aren't freedom, they are constriction. They all have negative consequences.

- Yes, it seems we are free to have a tantrum, but you will reap the guilt and regret. That wasn't freedom.

- Yes, it appears we are free to have an affair, but you will reap the divorce. What appeared to be freedom was not freedom!
- Yes, we think we're free to get drunk tonight, but you will reap the hangover and the photos on Facebook. So this is not true freedom.
- Yes, we are free to criticize and complain, but we will reap a soul that shrinks and hardens. That's not freedom, because true freedom leads to increasing freedom.

If you want to be more in this life than a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy, then you must serve! Serving is the freedom-grower. Serving is what gets us off of the Me-Mill, that just goes endlessly around and around and around but never takes you anyplace. It leaves you spent and wasted and guilty and isolated and frustrated, but other than that, exactly where you were when you started – just as empty, just as lonely, just as depressed. Serving is the freedom-grower. Serving is the path off of the Me-Mill.

And as I look round this morning I see so many people who, perhaps without realising the significance or the consequences, have been doing this. This congregation would not be here but for all of the people who choose to serve rather than wait to be served. Volunteers on the door, tea and counting today; those serving communion when others choose not to; Young Church leaders; the readers and prayers; the AV team and David; the church officer; David setting out tables and chairs and Robert who makes sure we have heating – that's only this morning
Too many others to mention in full
Encouraged by people turning up to pray – pray on your own
I see people growing in faith and life and following God's call – could we do better?
Of course we could. Every congregation could be better. Are we on the right track?
I believe so and today I simply want to encourage you and say, "Well done and keep going."

Then for Communion:

PRAISE: Take My Life

The Story

On the night of his arrest The Lord Jesus took bread,
And after giving thanks for it, he broke it and said:
"This is my body, which is for you;
do this in memory of me."
In the same way,
He took the cup after supper, and said,
"This cup is the new covenant

Sealed by my blood.
Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me.”

Thanksgiving

Minister: **The Lord be with you**

People: And also with you.

Lift up your hearts;

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God;

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

LET US PRAY

Loving God,
we thank you that you have called us together –
as your people,
your church,
your family United in Christ.
In his name we praise you.

We thank you for your love and acceptance that is shown through him –
for his willingness to eat with those rejected by society, his readiness to mix with
anyone prepared to receive him,
his openness to others that crossed all barriers.
In his name we praise you.

We thank you that Jesus has called us as friends –
that as we meet together in his name, so he adhered among us,
as we eat together around this table he is by our side,
and as we share with him we share with you, tasting life in all its fullness.
In his name we praise you.

Loving God, we thank you for this supper, instituted by Christ himself –
a memorial to his death, but also a celebration of his continuing life; a reminder to his
disciples then and his followers always of your love for all.
In his name we praise you.
Amen

Breaking the bread

And so, in obedience to Christ’s example on the night of his betrayal,
we **take bread and break it**,
recognising it as a symbol of the broken body of Christ.
In the same way **we take the cup**, recognising it as a symbol of the blood of Christ.

Minister: **Jesus, Lamb of God**

People: Have mercy upon us.
Jesus, bearer of our sins,
Have mercy upon us.
Jesus, redeemer of the world,
Grant us your peace.

These are the gifts of God for the people of God,
Let us do this, and remember Him.

Sharing

The Peace

When Jesus rose from the dead, he came and stood among his friends; and showing them his hands and side, he said, "Peace be with you!"

In his name and in his risen presence, I say:
The peace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

Praise: When I Survey the Wondrous Cross