

“God, Use Me”

Part 5 – The Life You’ve Always Wanted

Isaiah 58: 6-11; Luke 4: 16-19; Acts 1: 7



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It can be an awful thing to be used by someone. Over the years I have met with many people who have felt the pain of being used in the workplace. Some have said, “That company of that boss used me and then discarded me. I hate being used.” Almost all of us know people who have felt used in a courtship or a dating relationship or even in a marriage. They cry out with enormous emotion, “He used me.” “She used me.” You’ve heard that, haven’t you? It can be an awful thing to be used by someone.

On the other hand, as strange as this may sound, it can be a wonderful thing to be used by somebody. What young budding actor or actress has not longed to be picked for a lead part in a school play or musical, and what athlete, young or old, has not hungered to be used in the upcoming game. You can see them in the playing fields all over Portland in the spring, hanging around their coaches with that, “I am available” look in their eyes. “Use me, coach, use me.” And I have talked with people who have said in reference to their employment situation or their need for employment, “Do you know anybody in the church or in the community who could use a good salesperson, or a hard working secretary or builder?” I’d like to be used.

We also have a good group of people in this church who call or stop by and say, “How can I be used around here? I’d like to be used.” And I can identify with that desire. It is my life’s passion—one of my life’s objectives to be used by God. And I have felt enormous gratitude and profound joy when God has used me—in some little way in someone’s life. In fact, I have concluded that not much else in this whole life compares with the thrill of being used by God, used in specific ways, used to influence or effect individual lives, used in some way to advance God’s purposes in this world.

So, it can be awful to be used by someone if you are deceived or manipulated or taken advantage of involuntarily by a self-seeking, self centered person. It’s awful to be used under those circumstances. However, it can be wonderful to be used especially if someone you respect, someone you trust, someone you admire has a high integrity endeavor that enthralls you. Then it is understandable to volunteer your services and to say, “I’m available. I’d like to be a part of that. Can I sign up? Please use me.”

I want to affirm with you today that our God, our loving, transforming God has some wonderful endeavors that our Lord Jesus is more than willing to involve you in. But the first question is, “Do you know this Jesus sufficiently enough to follow him? Do you trust and love and respect him enough to believe that being used by God is a wonderful experience?”

You know it is relatively easy for us pastors, to determine most of the time—the people in our church who are excited about their faith, and who are growing in their relationship with Christ, and experiencing God’s love and forgiveness. Just ask these people if they want to be a part of what God is doing. Ask someone that. Would you like to be a part of something that God is doing?

Now that question tells a lot. Because if a person is merely going through the motions of being a Christian, attending church occasionally because it is the expected, proper thing to do, or simply because they want to get a little religion for the kids, if you ask that person if they would like to be part of something God is doing, they’ll usually respond by saying, “Well, not particularly. You see, I’m a busy person. I’m not really all that interested in what God is doing, because I have important things that I’m already doing.”

But if you ask a person who is a committed follower of Christ and who is grateful for all that God has done in his or her life, and whose heart has been melted by the love of Christ, if you ask that person, “Would you like to be part of something God is doing?” You know what the answer is going to be? “I’d be honored. Where? When? That would be wonderful. That would be a privilege.”

The question I have is, “How will you respond?” In May of this year we are planning a very special day that we are calling “One Great Day in May.” This is a day in which we hope to involve everyone at St. Andrew’s no matter what your age or physical condition, a day of hands-on-mission of all kinds. In preparation for that event we need you to fill out the purple insert in your bulletin and place it in the offering plate or return it to the church office and then once our mission projects are decided think about saying, “How can I serve?” In a few weeks our nominating committee will be approaching people to serve as deacons and elders of our church—how will you respond?

People with genuine faith in Christ, can’t think of anything more exciting than to be a part of what God is doing. They say, “Assign me a role, use me. I want to be a part of everything that God is doing—everything—in any way that I can.” But people who don’t understand the love of Christ and are just going through the motions of Christianity, they say, “I’d rather do my own thing, thank you. Please don’t involve me. I gave at the office. I already have a full life.” And little do they know that they are missing out on what really makes life worth living. John Ortberg whose videos we have been discussing in Life You’ve Always Wanted small groups says, “The primary reason Jesus calls us to servanthood is not just because other people need our service. It is because of what happens to us when we serve.” We are transformed when we serve others.

As a youth I used to enjoy hiking with my friends in the foothills above my home in Hollywood, California, and I enjoyed the view that those hikes in the Hollywood Hills would provide. Then one summer when I was in college, a friend invited me to join her on a hike in the High Sierras. And as I ascended into those majestic mountains, with their tall pine trees, alpine lakes and deep blue sky, I remember thinking that I hadn’t known what a real mountain was before. I had been content with my little molehill in Los Angeles—while the real mountains—the majestic peaks were waiting for me elsewhere.

It’s so difficult, isn’t it, to try to tell somebody who thinks that a little molehill in Los Angeles or in the Midwest has anything to do with a majestic High Sierra mountain, or the Rocky Mountains, or a Cascade peak. That’s sort of what I’m wrestling with here this morning. I encounter so many people who just sort of go along—carefully excluding God from their daily agenda in the workplace or in the neighborhood, sort of keeping God at an arm’s distance during their regular life, being so busy, doing all the important things on their agenda, day after day after day. I feel like saying to these people, “You’re settling for so little. You’re hiking on this little molehill and you’re calling it big time. You don’t know what you’re missing. You don’t know what a real mountain is.”

When you feel the thrill of being used by God. When you feel the thrill of being a part of something that's bigger than you. When you're surrendering yourself to be used by God all throughout your week in your family, in your workplace, in your neighborhood, and when you're on that kind of a path and it is filled with those wonderful, surprising workings of God—that's when you find what you have been looking for and yearning for—life in all of its abundance. How I wish everyone here could experience this kind of joy of being used by God. Once you have been used by God your whole perspective on your own little agenda is changed forever.

I'd like to get even more specific about this topic. Let me briefly describe three of the countless ways—there are hundreds of ways that Christ chooses to use us. Let me describe three of the ways Christ involves people in his high integrity mission in the world. The first is that Christ uses people like you and me right in the midst of our daily lives. Begin each morning by inviting God to use you through the day. John Ortberg calls this the “use me” prayer. Walk through the main events of your upcoming day with God in prayer. Make yourself available to be used at home. Look for ways you can be of service to those with whom you live. Throughout the day as you begin a conversation, pray a secret “use me” prayer. Listen for God's promptings to encourage others, or to speak the truth in love. Make your work an exercise in being used by God. Work with diligence – as if you were working directly for God. Look for ways to serve your coworkers. When you are interrupted, pause to see if this is an opportunity to be used by God through a moment of unplanned servanthood. Each time you pull out your wallet or write a check, pray a “use me” prayer with respect to your financial resources. Look for opportunities to give. As you experiment with the “use me” prayer for a week keep track of how the week goes. What difference did it make to live your week this way? Were you surprised by any moments when you really felt used by God? Could you identify anything that held you back or interfered with your ability to be used by God?

Another way Christ uses people like you and me is to provide encouragement and assistance to the afflicted and oppressed people in this world. In Isaiah 58 and Luke 4 we hear God saying, “I want to use you people to bring good news of the afflicted, to bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the enslaved and freedom to those people who are in prison, to comfort those who mourn, to spread on them an oil of gladness, instead of sadness. I want to use you people to feed the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your homes, and to cover the naked.”

We have no idea how God's heart breaks for people who are mistreated and discriminated against because of race or class or sex, or gay and lesbian people who are so often the brunt of such cruel jokes and violence.

We can't imagine how deeply God feels about the poor and the homeless and the hungry and the handicapped and the elderly. We can't fathom how much God cares for people like this. And you know what? God could have assigned angels to provide all the care for these people, but God made a decision to use us—to involve us in convincing all of these hurting people that they matter to God.

And God says to us, “If you let me use you to encourage and to provide assistance to the afflicted and the oppressed people in this work, if you let me use you—a new dignity will develop in you. You'll walk around with a sense of personal integrity that you didn't have before. You'll sense a new kind of self worth, and a new level of satisfaction. And God says in Isaiah 58, “If you give yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, your light will rise in the darkness, your gloom will become like midday. The Lord will guide you and satisfy your desires. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail.” What's God saying here? God is saying that if you will be usable, you will find satisfaction like nothing you have ever experienced before—you will experience a great spiritual power and emotional strength in your life. “

And you folks, who work at FISH, or at Neighborhood House, or with the International Medical Teams, or with Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger, and you who visit our shut ins and people in the hospital and in nursing homes or who work with our children or youth or in so many other ways,— you know that what I am saying is true, and that Jesus' words are true, “That it is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Let me touch upon just one other way you can be used by God. In Acts 1 Jesus said something like this to his followers: “Do you want a challenge that will bring a tremendous sense of meaning and value and purpose to your life here on this earth? Do you want to hike in the Hollywood Hills or on Mt. Hood? Let me use you to spread the good news all over the world—that people—all people matter to God—no matter what they have done—no matter what their past is.” Jesus said, “You shall be my witnesses. I could drop leaflets from heaven. But I want to involve you people to be my messengers to spread the word all over the world that lost people matter to God.” He said, “The Holy Spirit will give you courage and energy and wisdom and anything else that you need.”

We read in the book of Acts that the disciples took up the challenge and it was said of them that they turned the world upside down. They got the word out. And they experienced the thrill of being used by God to inform people of the greatest news of all. And we read in the Bible and in church history that Jesus' followers took physical beatings, they suffered persecutions, imprisonments, they were fed to lions, burned at the stake, crucified, and beheaded. And they just kept spreading the good news.

In some respects that's amazing to me, but in other ways it's not, because anyone of you who has even had the experience of informing someone that they matter to God, and if that person starts to get excited about their relationship with God—you know that nothing can beat that—in giving a human being a greater sense of purpose and value and fulfillment than knowing that God used you—to effect someone's transformation in this life and in the life to come. What a privilege it is to be Christ's ambassadors.

Isn't it time that more of us accept that privilege and get enthusiastic about it and say, “I want to be used by God in my daily life. I want to be used to encourage and assist the afflicted and the oppressed, and I want to be used to inform the world that all people matter to God and that forgiveness and new life are available through Christ.”

You know, there is something to be feared more than death and that is a wasted life—a life unattached to any of God's great endeavors—a self-willed, self-adsorbed existence that is narrow and routine and ultimately unsatisfying—a wasted life. You don't want to fool around in the foothills of Los Angeles when majestic mountain peaks await you with only that simple prayer, “I'm available God, please use me.” Thanks be to God for this tremendous promise.