

A) Introduction: DNA, Selfishness, and Service

As the science related to DNA has advanced over the years, understanding of genetics has become more and more important in many areas of our lives. Because our ability to perform DNA tests has gotten better and more precise, many wrongly convicted persons have been released from prison. Over the last decade, DNA tests to determine your ancestry have become more and more popular. And why is that? Because it is fascinating to know we come from and what all went into making us, US. And DNA testing of babies can help parents to know what kind of genetic diseases that their child may be more susceptible to, even when they are decades older.

What is DNA exactly? I just want to clarify that science was not one of my better subjects, even though I did have the privilege to learn under Larry Steider. But I do find these things fascinating. According to the internet, DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid which is a self-replicating material that is present in nearly all living organisms as the main constituent of chromosomes. It is the carrier of genetic information. DNA determines the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of someone or something, especially when regarded as unchangeable.

So what are some of those characteristics that DNA determines? Sex, eye color, hair color, whether you might have ADHD, whether you are an early riser or a night owl, if you happen to be an adrenaline junkie, indicators of genetic abnormalities or diseases, and propensity for obesity, just to name a few. And the amazing thing is as science continues to explore the human genome, we can understand more about what makes us tick, why we are the way we are, and now we can fairly accurately predict what a person is to become based on their DNA. Now scientists also recognize that although DNA may determine a propensity towards something, nurture also plays a huge factor in how a person's life will turn out.

Today, we're going to think about the DNA of our spiritual lives; what is in the core of our faith that determines how we live it out? Specifically, we are going to be thinking about SERVICE and whether it is something that we DO or if it is encoded into our spiritual DNA as something that we ARE.

Service is the opposite of selfishness because it's a sacrifice of your time and resources on behalf of another person. God did not create us to be selfish, but because of SIN in the world, it seems selfishness is a part of our DNA. Even our most precious babies and toddlers can be selfish. Rivers is like a little Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde when it comes to selfishness; one minute she will be perfectly happy sharing a toy she has with Luke or Titus or Anderson, and then next moment she will take it away, and also take away whatever they happen to be holding. It is unnatural for us to put other people before ourselves.

Now, I discovered something interesting when researching DNA for this morning's message. Empathy, which according to the University of Cambridge is "the ability to recognize another person's thoughts and feelings, and the ability to respond with an appropriate emotion to someone else's thoughts and feelings" and is a key component to service also happens to be something that is partially determined by DNA. In a study done by a partnership between 23andme and Cambridge, it was discovered that genetics can account for %10 percent of a person's empathy and that generally speaking women are more empathetic than men. %10 obviously doesn't account for the whole or even for a majority of a

person's ability to be empathetic or to serve, but it is interesting that some people are just born more likely to respond to others' needs. Wouldn't it be nice if service and selflessness were encoded into our DNA? When Jesus calls us to follow after Him, he is ultimately asking to re-encode our DNA so that it aligns with Him.

B) Our Vision: Service and Responding to Needs

This is going to be the last Sunday in our series on exploring Oak Grove's Vision Statement, and we are going to be talking about the element of 'service.' This comes from the letter 'R' in our statement which says that one of our priorities as a congregation "Responding to the needs of hurting persons in our community and around the world."

What does responding to needs around us require?

- Awareness: we need to be aware of the needs of our neighbors, both local and global
- Readiness: We need to eagerly anticipate and be ready to respond. We need to know how we are going to respond and have prayerfully prepared ourselves to respond when needs arise.
- Willingness: We need to be willing to respond when the time comes because when it comes to the busyness of our lives, it seems like it is often the most inconvenient times when needs come up around us.

Consider this: there are always opportunities to respond to the needs in our community and world. How aware are we of these opportunities? Or maybe a more pointed question, are we so focused on ourselves and our own lives that our eyes are closed off to what is happening in our neighborhoods and the world around us? And when we are aware, have there been times we could have responded but were not yet ready or prepared or willing?

We've talked at some length about our response to the flooding in West Liberty. A need presented itself and many in the congregation were not only aware of the need but ready and willing to act. I don't want to be prideful in this, but talking with the head of Logan County EMA, there were very few individuals and churches who responded to the flooding, especially to the degree that we did. We were aware, ready, and willing, which is wonderful. And we need to not rest on that event and those services, but to continue to look for opportunities to respond to the needs around us.

What does it mean for us to respond to needs that aren't sitting on our front doorstep? It can be easy, living in a rural Midwest area that does not experience the same problems as other areas of the world, to become insulated from some of the greater needs of the world around us. Right now, our country is experiencing a humanitarian crisis at the border of the United States and Mexico. From October 2018 to June 2019, 688,375 migrants have been detained at the border. Thousands of people arrive every day at ports of entry, many seeking asylum from violence in their home countries, and are immediately detained until their cases can be processed. Since the no-tolerance policy in the spring, parents and guardians have been separated from children, who are left sometimes in deplorable conditions because the detention centers just aren't prepared for the numbers of people coming, which has led to several

deaths. Notably one of the differences to those attempting entry to the country now versus in years past is that the border patrol are dealing with far less single men seeking jobs and many more families and unaccompanied minors. Unfortunately, the church is getting so caught up in the politics surrounding this issue that we are forgetting Jesus' call to give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and most importantly, to care for the little children. Regardless of politics, I hope that all of us can agree that we don't believe that separating kids from their parents or guardians is a terrible thing and that we don't want to see anyone die. And although we may disagree about how the law should handle this situation, we should be able to recognize that there are people in genuine need. And so we are aware of the need; we can choose to ignore it and hide in our shells, we can choose to be unprepared or unwilling to act, or we can choose to respond. Fortunately, there is a way to respond that doesn't require us getting a plane ticket to Texas or Arizona. When people come out of detention centers, they basically have nothing except the clothes on their backs. So we are collecting clothing and basic hygiene items to be collected in backpacks and sent to Mennonite Central Committee in Kansas, who will then give them to churches distributing these relief kits to migrants as they are let out of detention centers. There are lists out in the narthex with all of the items needed to make a kit. Your family can put together a whole kit, or you can go in with another family to put together a kit, or you can just buy some of the items which can later be put together in a kit. Now, this is just a small thing to do in the face of the larger problem, but it's better than nothing. So now you know the need and you know how you can meet the need. It's up to you to decide if you are ready and willing to do so.

Transition: But today's message isn't about encouraging you to get involved in more service projects, or to give more money to missions organizations, or to finally go on that youth summer mission trip that you keep hearing about, which by the way adults, if you ever want to join us on a mission trip you are always welcome, as long as you're okay hanging out with some pretty great high schoolers for a week. Today, we are going to think about service not as an activity but as a lifestyle.

C) Servants, Not Service

In thinking about the topic of service and what Scripture we would look at today, I was really hoping to do a character study on an Old Testament character who did some amazing service projects, or spend some time studying Paul's letter listing all of the benefits to short term mission trips. The problem is, there is no Biblical example of a 'service project' or even a 'short term mission trip.' Paul certainly had his missionary journeys throughout the New Testament, but they look vastly different than the way that we experience missions today. That being said, I think that those are valuable and powerful things that help people to orient their lives towards service and mission. But they are only meant to be orienting tools, not the end of service.

This morning, I want us to start shifting our thoughts towards being **SERVANTS**, something we are, no **SERVICE** as something that we do. One of the messages Jesus' had to constantly and strongly reiterate to His disciples was the importance of servant leadership. This was so difficult for them to understand, as it is for us because the world we live in doesn't reward those who take the position of servant; it promotes the strong and reminds us that the only way we will get what we 'deserve' is if we take it.

In our Scripture for today, we see a really interesting interaction between Jesus his disciples James and John. In it, the disciples approach Jesus and start by demanding that he do something for them, whatever it is that they would ask of him. First of all this may just be a cultural thing, but I can't imagine going up to a friend and saying "I want you to do for me whatever I ask of you." It takes a serious amount of nerves to begin a conversation that way. Jesus responds with the naturally curious question, "What do you want me to do for you?" They continue with their bold and maybe even arrogant line of questioning by asking to sit on the right and left of Jesus in glory. We don't exactly know what they meant by the phrase 'in glory,' if they were expecting to sit beside Jesus in whatever their understanding of the afterlife was, or if they were expecting him to take over the local government and that they would be given some kind of position of authority. In any case, what they were wanting was some recognition and authority amongst the disciples. If God is number one and Jesus is number two, they wanted to make sure that they would be three and four.

Jesus responds to their request by asking if they understood that to sit by his side meant experiencing the same suffering, cup and baptism, which he was going to experience. Whether or not they understood what it was that they were agreeing to, James and John assented that they were committed to the cause. And if we believe tradition surrounding the disciples, they would eventually be martyred for their faith. Jesus affirms that if they continued to follow Him they would definitely experience those things, but he says that what they are asking for is not his to give; God alone grants position and authority. Interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't chastise them for their request, even though as we see, the other disciples were upset with them for their presumptuousness. Instead, Jesus uses this moment to teach them the foundational truth for the Christian life: To become a **LEAST** in the world, is to become **GREAT** in the Kingdom of God.

In vs. 43, Jesus says "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." He uses the Greek word 'diakonos' which means 'to serve at a table.' Roman culture did not have a high view of service at this time, and in fact Plato was quoted as saying "how can one be happy when he has to serve someone?" Jesus is contrasting the ideals of leadership in the Kingdom of God, which lowers itself in order to serve all people, with the Roman world, which clearly valued position over anything else.

Then in verse 44, Jesus switches to the word 'doulos' which translates as slave, saying "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Jesus doubles down on his word usage and argument that believers are called to a different kind of service, one that is willing to sacrifice self for the sake of others, concluding in verse 45 "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Biblical scholar William Barclay writes in his commentary on Mark: "Greatness consisted not in reducing others to one's service, but in reducing oneself to their service."

Jesus demonstrated this in **John 13:1-17**, when at the Passover meal he takes the position of the lowliest servant in the house to do one of the dirtiest but honoring jobs in the house by washing his disciples feet. And he says in vv. 15-16 ¹⁵ "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done

to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.”

Jesus calls us to be SERVANTS, not to do service projects. As believers, service needs to be embedded in our DNA. As a church, service needs to be essential to our life together.

D) Conclusion:

What makes the work that Christian servants do different from aid offered by any other service agency? When we respond to the needs of the community and the world around us, our responses are rooted in the **GOSPEL of CHRIST**; it's Jesus that makes the difference. We are offering the very healing presence of Christ. We aren't just doing good 'acts' because Jesus told us so, we are standing with our neighbors as the physical presence of Jesus to them. In this way, whatever we do or offer is worth infinitely more because it also bears the presence of Christ. Without Jesus, Mennonite Disaster Service would just be FEMA and Mennonite Central Committee would just be The American Red Cross. Because we are rooted in the Gospel, and because we are committed to discipleship, we are becoming servants with a purpose to respond to the physical and spiritual needs of the world around us. Also, because we stand on the foundation of the Gospel, we recognize that the world needs people committed long-term to reconciliation.

The first thing that response requires is AWARENESS of needs of our neighbors. But it also requires AWARENESS of our own gifts and abilities to respond to those needs. Do we know what it is we have to offer to those around us? Our skills and our resources, our hearts and our time? One of the things that came up in Andy's time surveying the congregation was that there were some who wanted to serve but felt like either they weren't being asked to help or they didn't know where they could plug in. To anyone who may have wanted to serve and wasn't asked, or who volunteered and wasn't contacted, I want to offer sincere apologies on behalf of the leadership. We never want anyone to feel like their help isn't wanted. And we want to encourage and empower everyone to use God's gifts to respond to the needs in and out of the church, in our neighborhoods, and in the world.

This morning, we are going to have an opportunity to respond to Jesus' call to be servants to the world around us. In your bulletins is a full sheet of paper that says "Oak Grove Service Inventory" at the top. It's got a list of different ways that you can serve in and out of the church, as well as space to write other gifts/skills/abilities that you might have. Below that there, is space to write out resources you might be able to offer; for example, you might have a truck and/or trailer you'd be willing to lend or bring when somebody is moving. If you can think of something like that, please list it there. We are going to compile the results of these inventories and give them out to the chairs of committees/commissions and have them made available to you all so that when service opportunities arise, we can know who is willing to be involved and who to ask. In a moment, the praise team is going to play a response song and during that time I want you to prayerfully fill out these inventories and consider how God might be calling you to join in the service Oak Grove offers to the community. I would also like for you to think about whether you are aware of the needs around you and ready and willing to respond when the time comes. And if for any reason you don't feel aware, ready, or willing, to pray that God would change

your heart to a servant's heart so that you and we as a church can better follow God's mission for us in this place. Let's together make service not just something that we do but something that is a part of our DNA!