

I Corinthians 13:1-13  
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“CHHSM Sunday”

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Since returning from our trip to Cuba, almost daily someone asks, “What is it like?” There is a tremendous amount of interest in this country that has basically been off the travel radar for US citizens for decades. There were amazing parts like the beautiful and friendly people of Cuba, the gorgeous landscape, the beautiful music, the feeling of safety in a country where citizens didn’t have guns. It was wonderful to hear of the high literacy rates as a result of free education offered to all.

There were also great challenges. Public toilets were difficult to find, you had to pay, and rarely had toilet seats. An attendant had to pour a bucket of water in when you were done to flush it. All 4 of our hotel rooms leaked. Many computers at the airport still ran on DOS. Salaries were very low creating a subsistence economy where everyone had something, but few had enough to thrive. And the warnings about waiting in lines were accurate; 2 ½ hours to get our luggage when we arrived from Miami. And nearly 6 hours standing in airport lines to depart back to Miami.

Also, I observed there was not a very strong work ethic. The person serving at the check-in desk at the airport made the same amount of money if they checked in 10 people an hour, or 100 people an hour. There was little incentive to increase efficiently.

In preparation for celebrating Health and Human service Sunday this morning, I reflected upon the concept of service, why do Christians serve others? Why do we care? We have plenty on our agenda, our lives are often swamped. It is easy to think -- I’m barely taking care of my business, let others take care of theirs.

CHHSM, which is the Council on Health and Human service Ministries of the United Church of Christ, is an umbrella organization which envisions itself as providing leadership for its member ministries, and an interfaith community of health and human service ministries. CHHSM lives to remind all of us that our call to serve is a call to become servant-leaders.

A colleague, Rev. Monica Wedlock Kilpatrick writes, “A servant leader takes seriously the commandments to love God and love neighbor. Is one who strives to see the world as God intended and joins in service to others to bring about that vision – a vision of hope, justice, love, joy, and peace for all.”

According to Robert Greenleaf who is credited as coining the term in the early 1970’s, a servant-leader has a call to serve first. Not a call to lead first appeasing some desire for power or control, or to acquire material possessions or other personal advantages.

Greenleaf writes, “The difference in servant leadership manifests itself in the care taken by the one who is service-first minded -- to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs

are being served.” He adds, “The best test of a servant leader, though difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, are they more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be more deeply deprived? “

Today we hear from one of the church’s earliest and best examples of Servant-leadership. In 2 Cor., Chapter 11, Paul recounts the suffering he has undergone which included imprisonments, beatings, and near-death experiences, all for the sake of sharing the good news of God’s love for all and invitation to follow Jesus.

He writes in some of the most eloquent words of scripture about what urges him to continue serving in the face of suffering... God’s Love.

I Corinthians 13 he tells us, we can speak words of faith, we can exercise prophetic powers, we can have the faith to move mountains, we can give away all our possessions, even our life, but if we don’t have love -- these actions, typically thought of as examples of true faith, are empty.

Love becomes the cornerstone of all Christian caring and service ministries. God’s love experienced and expressed person to person, to offer care and nurture; to provide home, healing, and counsel.

Love is why Cedar Community in West Bend, WI, was the first senior community in the state of Wisconsin to offer memory care. And as a health and human service ministry of the UCC, Love is why Cedar Community is regularly ranked among the friendliest and best senior communities in our state.

Love is why Parks’ Edge Preschool, another health and human service ministry of the UCC and a ministry of this congregation, works tirelessly to maintain the state of Wisconsin’s 5 star rating, and national accreditation with a faith-based component. Love, and this call to service-first, is why the director Ellen, board of directors, and staff provide the best childcare one can receive outside of their own family.

Paul reminds us everything else will come to an end, only love endures. In a world of increasing individualism, in a time when diverse fears press us to turn inward and care for number 1, in a day where the needs of entire communities of people can fall through the cracks, God calls the church out of ourselves to, like Jesus himself, give ourself away serving and caring for others.

On, Sept. 26, 2014, the UCC’s Council on Health and Human services convened more than a dozen members to discuss the situation in Ferguson, Missouri, where Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black man, was shot by a white police officer just weeks before.

Several CHHSM ministries were on the ground providing critical care. Deaconess Faith Community Nurse Ministries was there immediately administering health assistance and advocating for equal treatment for all people involved.

The Deaconess Foundation made a special allocation of \$100,000, funds which have focused on youth organizing, community development and other support for young black men.

Every Child's Hope, a CHHSM member serving children, youth and families in the St. Louis area provides crisis counselors for the community, along with support for area police officials and workshops for local teachers to aid them in assisting students.

The Neighborhood Houses of St. Louis, comprised of inner city centers offering accredited childcare, after school programs attended by 900 children, and a Teen Mom's support group – heard the young people in their programs express fear of the local police. So they partnered with local police to build relationships between officials and area youth.

As we stand near the beginning of 2016, how will you measure the next year of your life? I close with an invitation, offered from the lyrics of a song in the Musical RENT,

“How do you measure, measure a year? In daylights, in sunsets; In midnights, in cups of coffee; In inches, in miles; In laughter, in strife; In five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes; How do you measure, a year in the life?

How about love? Measure your life in love!

Amen