The Call to Serve

One of my earliest exposures to service, or at least that I can remember, was as a teenager watching my Dad volunteer at our parish, St. Patrick’s in Norcross. It made an impression on me to witness a father of five share his time freely, as well as see the friendships he made through his involvement. It helped make our family become a part of a community. In college, our fraternity volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and at the Special Olympics. At the end of the day, it felt good knowing that I’d spent my time doing something positive. But between books, beer and band parties, the time I made to volunteer or to serve in that type of capacity was few and far between. Even into early adulthood, it was easy to say “I don’t have the time”. When my wife Tricia and I moved to Alpharetta in the spring of 1995, we were expecting our first child and had our very first home – life was good. We began attending Mass at the closest Catholic church, but found ourselves stuck week after week in the cry room after our daughter was born. Putting our energy into caring for a newborn, we shied away from becoming active in an established parish and again, I found myself saying “I don’t have the time”. After a few months, we both agreed we were disappointed with our parish life and found a fresh start at St. Brigid. Being a mission parish, all the ministries were just getting started, so maybe I felt more comfortable getting involved. But I didn’t just suddenly gain a few extra hours in the week. The difference was that I made getting involved a priority. Getting involved helped me feel like a part of a community, which I’m sure is how my Dad felt all those years before. Plus, it gave me a sense of purpose and reminded me that we’re meant for “something bigger”.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountaintop cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” Matthew 5:13-16

We officially joined the parish and I got involved with a few ministries, including the Men of St. Brigid (aka MOSB). There was no Knight’s council at the time and there were a lot of guys who were in the same boat of trying to meet other men in the parish, so it seemed like a natural fit. Over the
years, I’ve served in the MOSB in a variety of capacities and I’ve been blessed in many ways.

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others.” – Philippians 2:1-4

One of the many blessings I’ve received is having had the opportunity and privilege to witness true servant leadership – to serve with men who give so tirelessly, who do so with joy, who inspire those around them. They put their heart and soul into whatever they’re asked to do – whether it’s cooking a meal, doing landscaping, renovating a house or simply washing dishes. These men, these servant leaders, serve not out of selfishness, not for recognition, but out of love.

Today is the feast day for the Blessed Mother Teresa, who passed away on Sept. 5th, 1997. When you think of serving others, there’s probably no one else from our lifetime who is held in higher regard. There’s a famous quote from Mother Teresa in which she implores the reader to “find your own Calcutta”. Mother Teresa’s words remind us that there is so much good that can be done in the world, no matter how big or small. Serving others does not need to involve traveling half way around the world to make a difference. It can be in our neighborhoods, our schools, the soup kitchen downtown – even in our own homes. Whether you’re going to Haiti to build homes or simply taking care of a sick family member or friend, you’re making a positive impact in someone else’s life.

Through my involvement at St. Brigid, I was able to find my “Calcutta”. Whether volunteering at the Men’s Shelter downtown, or putting in a full
day’s work at Covecrest or helping when needed during Special Needs Life Teen, I’ve been blessed to see God at work. There have been a number of moments, what I call “God moments”, that have stayed with me while volunteering – watching my kids play games with the guys at the Men’s Shelter while I talked to Jerome, a guy from Cleveland, OH who moved to ATL to get a fresh start and who is thankful to have a roof over his head; to hear 70 guys snoring in the gym at Central Pres., knowing it’s a blessing to be safe inside from the winter’s cold and have a roof over their head, something we easily take for granted; seeing Mark Halaszynski, who spent the entire day preparing a meal fit for a king’s banquet – plates filled with a half-chicken, collard greens, mac & cheese, sweet potato cornbread and peach cobbler, receive a standing ovation from the men at the shelter; receiving thank-you notes from seminarians for the financial support we were able to provide, telling us it was an answer to their prayers; going to Mass in the tiny chapel at Covecrest after a hard day’s work and listening to the joy in the voices of those singing at the end of Mass; sharing in the smiles and laughter as the kids celebrated their favorite part of Special Needs Life Teen, the end-of-the-night dance party. The list goes on and on. They are moments of humanity and joy, thanksgiving and hope. They are memories that bring a smile to my face and a reminder that you can’t outgive God – what you give you will receive back more than tenfold.

As men, it’s a natural progression in life – if we marry, we go from thinking less about “me” and more about “we” (hopefully). When our kids come along, we continue to give more of ourselves. When we serve others, we continue that outward focus. It’s what Paul encourages us to do in his letter to the Philippians. It’s what Christ modeled for us during his public ministry. It’s a change not only in our mindset but in our hearts. This personal change can also lead to an awareness of opportunities to serve others, both big and small. As Mother Teresa said, “You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have the eyes to see.” There are many times, when I reflect back on what’s happened over the course of a day, I try to remember when there was a time that God opened a door for me to help another – and whether or not I responded. Did I respond in a joyful
manner, or was I sullen or seem put out? Did I convince myself that I was too busy or that I had other things to do? Why did I think God wanted me there?

“For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” – Galatians 5:13-14

As Catholics, we’re called to serve. But it’s up to us to answer the call. Serving others is a choice – it’s choosing to love. The first letter of John tells us, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love”. Serving makes us a conduit, allowing God to work through us to allow others to feel His love. As the Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila so lovingly reminds us, “Christ has no body on Earth but yours, no hands, no feet on Earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.” Serving has deepened my relationship with God, as it’s given me a greater awareness of His presence. It’s given me the opportunity to see God at work in a very special way – to witness the joy in His creation, giving hope to those in need. I’ve found that serving has deepened my relationship with God in another way – by being open to His will. As men, we have a tendency to want everything to fall into place according to “our plan”. When serving, I know God has put me in the place where He wants me to be, to do His work. By being open to His plan, it can also lead to what I call the “ripple effect”. An example of this that I’ve seen firsthand would be my wife Tricia. For years, she felt a calling to the Mustard Seed ministry, but her fear of flying always held her back from going on a mission trip. After attending CRHP three years ago, she decided to put her fear of flying on God and went to Nicaragua. She’s gone back every year since. Her experience led her to volunteer at Toni’s Camp, a camp specifically designed for special needs teens and adults, with our
daughter Marissa. Last year, Tricia volunteered with the Special Needs Life Teen, along with both of our kids and next year, in addition participating in the adult trip, she’ll be leading a mother/daughter trip to Nicaragua in the summer. After casting the “first stone”, she followed where she felt God was calling her, touching not only those she served, but also having an impact on our children as well.

There are so many opportunities to serve just through the many ministries at St. Brigid – whether it’s through the MOSB or KofC, SVdP or Mustard Seed, Habitat for Humanity or Special Needs Life Teen, just to name a few. I’ll leave you with one final quote that’s resonated with me since the first time I heard it:

“I am one, but I am only one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do. And by the grace of God, I will.” – Edward Hale

All it takes is for you to cast the first stone . . . .

Thanks for listening – God Bless