

Isaiah 58:6-12  
Luke 15:1-10

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## GOOD WILL

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. Isaiah 58:10

If the theme of this service has not asserted itself yet, it's Volunteerism, intentional service beyond ourselves. "Volunteer" comes from the Latin *voluntas*, good will; not good feelings or good intentions, but volition, choosing to act to make a difference.

Angela Madsen is an extraordinary human being and an exceptional athlete. A Marine Corps veteran from Long Beach, California, in her age category (she's now 45) she is a multiple gold medalist in track and field. In midlife she started rowing not just in your average grueling, physically and mentally excruciating races on relatively flat-water inland courses where, incidentally, she has collected four World Rowing Championship gold medals, Madsen also competes in long-distance ocean going coastal races. But she has set her personal goals higher still. In June of this year with three colleagues Angela will travel from the United States to the United Kingdom—not by plane or ship, but by rowing 3,200 miles in an open boat. This extraordinary feat has been done by only a very few people.

Now, as any rower or coach will tell you, 70-80 percent of the power in rowing comes from the legs in that long slide on the seat before the arms finish the stroke. To emphasize this point, when our daughter, Katherine, started rowing at Conestoga eight years ago, I asked her how far she thought she could walk. She thought about it and said, "Pretty much indefinitely, I guess."

"And how far do you think you could walk on your hands?" I asked.

She laughed. "Maybe two steps." I wanted her to see how disproportionately powerful the legs are. A few months back I got a taste of that when I had to use crutches for a while after hip surgery—and I had one good leg!

The special challenge in Angela Madsen's case is that she has no use of her legs at all. She and her three companions on the transatlantic row are paraplegic. Twelve years

ago, while playing basketball for the U.S. Marine Corps, Angela sustained an injury that back surgery was unable to repair. She lost the use of her legs. Her life went through a series of incidents that would have destroyed the spirit of most people. After losing her job and her income she became homeless. The Department of Veterans Affairs even demanded that she give them back her wheelchair. And to cap it off, she was told by her physician that her physical condition was a waste of human life!

To loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke . . . .  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin” (*Isaiah 58:6ff*).

Angela was determined to make a difference, determined not to bow to circumstance or let life dictate to her how she should be. Now as if these personal challenges and commitments are not enough to consume every inch of her time, Angela takes that same determination and drive that she directed toward self-improvement and directs it toward others. As a spokesperson for PVA (Paralyzed Veterans of America) she volunteers with the California chapter, visiting the newly injured in VA medical centers, speaking at hospitals, schools, universities, and at other functions to help broaden disability awareness. So she created the California Adaptive Rowing Program “for people with physical and mental challenges.” Students from regional schools volunteer with the program and many have been inspired to pursue rehabilitative medicine and adaptive physical education. “I like to inspire people to set goals not limits, she says. “I like being part of an organization that helps people realize their potential, not limitations.” That would be a wonderful creed for any church. She spends so much of her life searching after those who, by circumstance, can easily become another forgotten wheelchair victim once the bloom of the veteran hero has faded. Those she finds in forgotten corners of tired green VA hospital lounges she seeks to rescue, like lost sheep brought home, or lost coins, precious treasure salvaged from society’s dusty floors. For her work she is the recipient of the Leo Reilly award for outstanding spirit and determination, and the “Women Who Inspire Us” award from the Amateur Athletic Foundation. In 2008 she hopes to row in the Paralympics in Beijing.

On Friday, within minutes of reading the article about Angela Madsen over lunch at the Farmer’s Market, I was standing in line at the cheese counter, searching the counter top with an eagle eye for the free samples, a copy of “World Rowing” magazine tucked under my arm. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man, about my age, leaning on a tall walking stick, unsteady and noticeably twitching. “World Rowing,” he said, eyeing the

magazine. “You a rower?”

“No,” I said, always eager to pick up a conversation on that magnificent sport, “but my daughter is.”

“I have Parkinsons,” he said. “I’ve been rowing every day for twelve years on a Concept 2 (an indoor rowing machine).” Other than the Parkinsons he looked in wonderful shape. And so we talked on.

What Angela Madsen and her companions have achieved, what the gentleman with Parkinsons has accomplished in the face of a debilitating disease, is by an act of will. The power of the will to choose the good is potentially the greatest yet least utilized resource of humankind. To will and choose the good—“Good will.” This was Nelson Mandela’s point in the quotation on last week’s bulletin cover, when he said, “You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. . . . We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone.”

Few of us here, especially this side of retirement, feel that we don’t have enough hours in the day to accomplish all that’s on our agenda. Angela Madsen’s story reminds us that it can always be otherwise. After all, we all have the same number of hours in a day, we just use them differently. We all have opportunity to make a larger difference, a magnificent difference. We

live in a world where people starve to death by the thousands each day for want of food, while we need to install sink disposals, and make golf courses out of our mountains of surplus food and packaging surplus; and where small children are tied up and beaten to death by their parents, or lost in foster systems *for years* because pork barrel political appropriations will not fund social services properly. We are a long, long way from the kingdom of God that Jesus gave his life for—2,000 years ago!

So here are some good-will reasons for giving of yourself voluntarily and gladly, to make this world over better than we found it, after the spirit of Christ. I challenge you out of your experience, past and future, to build your own list. Here is a portion of mine:

Volunteer . . .

- Because when we worship God in Christ, pledging one thing but doing another is *hypocrisy*. As Isaiah wrote, “If you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted . . . Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help and he will say, ‘Here I am’.”
- Volunteer because volunteering makes an *immediate* difference in someone’s life.
- Volunteer because it gives a *human face* to human need. • Volunteer because it *accustoms the heart* to acts of compassion.” 2,500 years ago Plato said, ““Always be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle.”
- Volunteer because *kindness is contagious*. The beauty of volunteered good will is that it has the capacity to grow exponentially, like Jesus’ analogies of the seed-- from one seed come 100, from 100 come 10,000, from ten thousand come 10,000,000, in just three seasons! This was Jesus’ point about taking the reins of goodness.
- The best good will is often *unplanned*—it makes for senseless acts of beauty and random acts of kindness.
- Volunteer because volunteerism in the spirit of Christ is *self-transcending generosity*.
- Volunteer because it costs something that *everyone can afford*, but when it is withheld it enlarges the store of human woe and suffering.
- Volunteer because it *gets our mind off ourselves*, where it least needs to be.
- Volunteer because it *makes neighbors and friends* of total strangers.
- Volunteer because it is *what you would yearn for* if the roles were reversed.
- Volunteer because *we have promised* ourselves to God, and thereby to God’s people.

Amen.