



## SERVANTHOOD—SIMPLY CARING

Philippians 2:1-11

Mark 10:35-45

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*"...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant..."*

Mark 10:43

Prayer for Illumination: God our helper, by your Holy Spirit, open our minds as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed. We would be led into your truth, and sent forth to be your people, present in your world. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen

SERVANTHOOD.....the text from which the word is derived is found in the forty-third verse of the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, the words of Jesus: "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant..."

My guess is that nowhere else the rest of today, or in all the days of the week to come, will you hear anything like what you have just heard. It will not cross anybody's mind to tell you: in order to be great, you must be a servant; if you wish to be first, you must become a slave. This is not how the world thinks. It is not how the world behaves. It is a complete reversal of the way the world works and of what the world values. It is one more instance of how the gospel rubs against the grain of our culture. "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant..."

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The text is found within a story that reveals how far the first disciples were from what Paul calls "the mind of Christ", despite their having been with Jesus, despite their having listened to him and watched him for some time. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, Mark says. His disciples were with him, following, but at some distance. Do you have the picture in your mind's eye? Jesus was striding ahead; all twelve of the disciples straggling along behind. Suddenly, James and John quicken their pace, catch up to their leader, and make their request. When Jesus comes into his glory, they hope to be assigned places of prominence and privilege, one on his right hand, the other on his left.

Now, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, it is easy to condemn James and John. But before we dismiss their request as crude and blatantly self-serving, try to put yourself in their place. They seem to have believed that Jesus' ministry was about to end in triumph. Jesus had tried to tell them otherwise, but the disciples appear never to have got what he was saying. They didn't hear Jesus' prediction that he was headed for trouble, mostly, I imagine, because they didn't want to hear it. They were like the mother who doesn't want to hear that her child is acting out her unhappiness; like the alcoholic who denies he has a problem. The disciples had not heard Jesus say he was soon to die. They still entertained the notion that he was on his way to glory.

It was not unreasonable. James and John knew what Jesus could do. They had seen him hold a crowd spellbound. They had witnessed his power to heal. They had watched him stand up to his critics. As far as they knew, the people were with him. James and John believed they were on the side of a winner, and they wanted to share the spoils of victory.

James and John, along with Peter, seem to have been part of the inner circle. They will be the ones to go with Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane. James and John were close to Jesus.

He seems to have depended upon them, confided in them. Why shouldn't they, of all the disciples, expect to be rewarded? Rank has its privileges, as we say. It's all perfectly natural; it's normal human behavior; it's the way the world works. You know it. I know it. Jesus knows it.

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Yet, he says to his disciples, "It shall not be so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Unlike the secular world, the normal world, if you will, where power gives one position, and prestige, and perks, within the company of Jesus' disciples it is precisely the reverse: "...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant..."

It is all so alien to ordinary experience, so at odds with the way of the world, is it any wonder James and John and their fellow disciples were so slow to catch on? And, it's not so easy for us either, is it? Which is why Lent after Lent, Holy Week after Holy Week, we have to meet Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, and learn all over again what an odd, contrarian way our Lord asks us to go. Every Lent we have to learn that being a Christian is a matter of following someone who is headed somewhere we would not go if left to our own devices and desires.

Our text is revolutionary, radical. And this word of Lent—"servanthood"—is one that makes us wonder—makes me wonder, anyway—if we can ever begin to live in a way that will fulfill Jesus' expectation. It would be easy for me, this morning, to use the balance of my sermon time to suggest that like James and John and the other disciples,

we still don't get it. The world is much with us; its ways become our ways; it values become our values; and what the world considers normal, we take as our norm. I could even suggest to you that, much of the time, we come to this place of worship, just like James and John, to ask Jesus to do for us, instead of asking ourselves what we might do for him. I could go down that road, but I am not going to do so, and the reason is, it is not the whole story.

Recently an acquaintance of mine, someone who is not a member of this congregation, but who knows I am a pastor, asked me an interesting question: "What do you like best about what you do?" What gives you the greatest sense of satisfaction?"

I thought for a moment before I answered. What I said was something like this: "The thing I like best is when the congregation I serve is what it is intended to be, and does what it is meant to do." "And does that happen?" this other person asked. "Yes," I said, "it does—many times it does."

This brings me back to those verses from the tenth chapter of Mark, which seem to be giving us a warning. They seem to be saying, 'Make sure the greatness you desire is the greatness Christ wants you to have. Remember that what distinguishes the followers of Jesus Christ is their aptitude for service. And, remember that in the kingdom of God, greatness is measured not by the applause and popularity you achieve, but by what you do to help others find life—the abundant life Christ came to bring.'

Apropos of that conversation I mentioned a moment ago, what gives me joy, this morning, is the way so many of you have taken those words to heart, how much you have learned, not from me, but from the Master Servant. In addition to the Network of Caring, I'm thinking now of those of you who give valuable time to teach our children; who give of yourselves in the effort we call the Patio Sale; who brave the elements to offer worshipers rides on the golf carts all year long; who have said yes to the call to become officers in the church; who meet every Monday to look after the church buildings and grounds; who get up early once a month to make lunches for the homeless in Tucson; who spend hours rehearsing the music that inspires us to know God's presence Sunday after Sunday; who call on those who haven't been able to get to worship for months or years, and yet whose love of Christ and his church knows no limits.

I am thinking of those of you---who make birthday calls, who arrange and deliver beautiful bouquets of flowers, who send cards and notes to the sick and hurting, who comfort the lonely, the depressed, the grieving; and who, in short, give of yourselves unselfishly in ways that few people know about; who **SIMPLY CARE!**

I know that many of you serve in other ways, as well, in and through this congregation, and apart from it. I know how some of you have a child or a grandchild with special needs to care for, or a spouse with Alzheimer's, or an elderly loved-one who is frail, and you do what needs to be done without complaining, you simply care and you serve out of love and respect.

None of this is spectacular or sensational. As Henri Nouwen once said, it doesn't have to be. It's not a question of fixing everything. Some things cannot be fixed. It's not a

matter of righting every wrong; unfortunately, not every wrong can be put right. It is seeing a need and meeting it. “What’s fascinating,” writes Nouwen, “is that the first step invariably makes the second one easier. You begin to discover that love begets love, and step by step you move further forward on the way to God.”

Which means, there is a reward, after all. Not the reward of a privileged position, not the reward of prestige or power, but the reward of drawing closer to Christ, of learning ever so gradually “to let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...”

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It’s all so very odd, so very different from the so-called “normal” way. It is not about success. It is about faithfulness. You won’t find in the whole of the New Testament a single occurrence of the word “success”. Jesus followers are not asked to succeed; they—we—are asked to be faithful—faithful to him who said, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

To know the love of God, to really know, love, and follow him, means having a new ambition: “...whoever would become great among you must be your servant...”

Amen...and so be it...in my life...and in yours!