

A little boy was in church after worship, observing a number of plaques with names and dates on them. The boy asked the priest, “What are these plaques for?” The priest looked somber and replied, “Those plaques honor the people who died in the service.” The little boy grew afraid and he asked, “Which service did they die in? Was it the 7:45, the 9am, or the 11am service?”

Today I will be talking about service. Not necessarily military service or worship services, but simply serving others. Jesus said if we want to follow him we must serve others.

Of course, there is more to the story. Consider the word “glory.” This word is used to mean bright and shiny. Is that what the disciples are asking for when they say, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”¹ Do they want simply to be bright and shiny?

Glory. To be the greatest. What more could one person want than to be the best. This word glory, in this context, fascinates me. It might surprise you to know that in my family, I am one of the quiet ones. When I was small, I could talk at times, I could also be so quiet that you would never know I was in the room. I would always want invisibility as my superpower. So this striving for glory puzzles me. Yet it is so easy to want to be the best. Our culture makes us yearn for being first at everything - first in our class in academics, MVP at any sport, the team that wins the championship. You won’t see any awards for the bat girl/boy for a team. The custodial staff does not usually make decisions about directing a company. Yet, it is often those who serve, those with a servant heart that have the strongest influence. This reminds me of a quote from C.S. Lewis.² “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”

It is important to note the sermon context: what happened between last Sunday and this Sunday. We are missing four key verses where Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. So for the average Sunday reader we have gone from hearing about the rich man to the disciples failing once again to follow Jesus. There is a reason the disciples, as portrayed in Mark, are known as the “duh-ciples.” They just do not seem to understand. Mark is writing to an ultra observant crowd. Remember, the Gospel in its original context would have been read outloud; and the writer knew this - he put the three stories in a row to highlight the fact that Jesus wanted his disciples to give up anything and everything to follow him. I heard a new term this week - to be washed out for Jesus.³ It means that we are all in for Jesus. We cannot get enough of him; that is what Jesus tells John and James, he says, “to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”⁴

This speech is also given in the context of analogies, which link two things for the purpose of explanation or clarification. For example, Forrest Gump is fond of repeating an analogy from his mother, “Life is like a box of chocolates--you never know what you are going to get.” That’s a way of saying that life is full of surprises. In many ways, our Eucharistic services are rich with analogies to the actions of our Christian rites: Baptism is our rebirth.⁵ Christ was first telling his disciples that they are reborn through this baptism.

¹ Mark 10:37

² Lewis, C.S. (1943). *Christian Behaviour*. London: The Centenary Press. p.17

³ Wright, N.T. (2001). *Mark for Everyone*. Knoxville: Westminster Press. p.139

⁴ Mark 10:40

⁵ Jennings, N. (2020). *Liturgy I: Week 10*.

Jesus was also affirming that his disciples did not quite understand the intricacies of following him.⁶ Jesus also uses metaphors, which are figures of speech where one thing is applied to something that is not literally the same as the thing to which it is being compared. Here, Jesus also uses a metaphor, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized.” Here these are metaphors for the cross.⁷ Jesus is alluding to the future martyrdom of his disciples.

The cross is the way to turn around the world’s ways and make them joyful. As Christians, we don’t think of the cross as the means to an end, or a difficult moment that will pass, or a dragon to be slain like in *Sleeping Beauty*. Instead, the way of the cross takes what the world thinks is powerful and turns it upside down; instead focusing on what God says is right.⁸ As Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake...will save it.”⁹ Or “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”¹⁰ Jesus is flipping the world’s expectations upside down.

In a recent Bible Study I attended, Andy Stanley, told the story of a woman who was the grumpiest of grumps. And a man who was the most joyful Christian. He saw it as his call to marry her, and while neither Reverend Stanley nor myself is recommending this action, what I will tell you is that this marriage helped her better see God. What if we all took bold actions to make our neighbors and friends see Christ? What would it look like if in the face of gossip and power grabbing we wish others well? What if we put aside competition for the sake of serving others? What if instead of holding on grudges we emulate Christ and forgive? I am not saying that we should remain in unhealthy relationships, yet I am challenging us on those moments of trivial slights. To be the greatest by serving those who slight have. Sometimes getting credit is not about us; it is instead about giving credit to others.

This takes a great deal of humility. It means thinking of the whole body of Christ and most particularly thinking of others first. I read biographies of several former press secretaries of various presidents. One noted how the Late President George HW Bush used to give credit for his accomplishments to all who participated in the victory. He would constantly and consistently lift others up. When something went wrong, he would acknowledge his failure and take personal responsibility. That is what humility looks like in action, taking responsibility for ourselves and lifting up others.

More often in the world we witness people wanting all the credit and none of the blame. Who can really blame them? As Christians we are signing up to literally lay our lives down for our faith. We promise to commit our lives to God. We promise to give the first fruits. This is hard work, especially in a society bent on cynicism and completion. We want to be sure before making a decision. This is not the call we have vowed to make. It is not the way to God’s success where we bask in glory. Relying on worldly things will eventually lead to hollowness. A person with billions of dollars may lack that connection to the divine.

⁶ Ramshaw, G. (2007). *Christian Worship*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. pp.143-149

⁷ Soards, Marion. Dozeman, Thomas. McCabe, Kendall. (1993). *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year b: After Pentecost 2*. Nashville: Abingdon. p.99

⁸ Again, Wright notes, “But the cross is not, for Jesus or for Mark, a difficult episode to be got through on the way to a happy ending. It is precisely God’s way of standing worldly power and authority on its head.” *Mark for Everyone*. Knoxville: Westminster Press. p.140

⁹ Mark 8:35

¹⁰ Mark 9:35

Consider these words from today's reading in Hebrews referring to Jesus, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

This is a radically different way of looking at success. Obedience for glory. Not exactly a winning slogan. Yet when we put Jesus at the center of our lives, you will notice kindness. You will notice a servant's heart. You will find contentment and rest for your souls.

That sure is better than fleeting success. Now, I know that stewardship season is starting. Don't you want to give the highest pledges? Of course! Saint Dunstan's can do amazing things and we need the money. Here is the secret though: everything we do is for God's glory not ours. From the vestments to the nursery. Everything glorifies God.

While James and John wanted too much personal glory, they did get something right. They turned to Jesus with their hearts desires. Who among us has not done the same thing? We may try and fail like James and John, or Peter. The key is to remain focused and faithful to Christ. They would go on and truly learn to serve. Eventually, by looking to Christ we can learn to follow him. All we have to do is serve. Amen.