

But to Serve
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Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ ³⁶ And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ ³⁷ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ ³⁹ They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but 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.’

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

We are far enough removed historically from servitude and slavery that we don’t have a firsthand understanding of the disdain people held for those who were “beneath them” but it isn’t impossible to imagine. As with so many other things, what Jesus said was shocking: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” When this was spoken wasn’t far removed in time from the time of power-hungry Nero; and there were others before him who demonstrated a near-equal thirst to be the greatest. Surrounded by such leadership, the disciples were hoping for a taste of greatness for themselves – after all, they were aligning themselves with the savior of the people. Surely, there would be residual perks for those who were closest to the savior.

And then the person whose coattails they wished to ride tells them the way to be great is to be not like the Roman rulers, the Gentile rulers, but to be like the people who might as well have been nameless and faceless. The people who washed feet and brought food! The people who had no choice but to do what was asked of them. The people whose work it was to attend to the needs of others. Jesus had asked if they could drink from the same cup and have the same baptism and they said, “yes,” foolishly assuming that the cup and the baptism were ones of earthly glory – we’re in on the cup of abundance and the baptism of power.

Of course, **we** know that the cup was one that Jesus would ask God to remove and the baptism was by death into new life. Here’s the thing: the disciples should have known it, too, or at least understood generally because this exchange happens after the **third** time that Jesus predicts his death for

the sake of the world. As those who have come after, we can thank them for their example of obtuseness which, hopefully, helps us avoid being obtuse ourselves. We can firmly say we understand that we shouldn't seek to be served but to serve. The message is so culturally ingrained that people have usurped the message, people like President Kennedy who said famously, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Well, perhaps, we aren't out of the woods – if we can recite these rote messages – you knew how that phrase would end, didn't you? – maybe we aren't really hearing them as new words, as the enigmatic charge they are meant to be.

Here's an immediate reminder then. And I take this license because he is now part of the communion of saints who lead the way for us. Yesterday we formally celebrated the life of the Reverend Dr. Roger D. Patton and the words which came to me over and over to describe him were "servant heart." For Roger, his life was his ministry and, whether he was serving in a church or on a board or as an alderman, he was working to improve the lives of others. His deep-down, in-his-very-heart, desire to serve others drove what he said and, even more so, what he did. Our immediate reminder is his life. Roger certainly didn't seek the position of alderman for the glory. He sought it because it was a chance to make a difference in the lives of people. His motivation was making the lives of others better. The welfare of others seemed to always be in the front of his mind. His life is a reminder and an example that we can do the same.

As we prepare to pledge to God, not to this church but to God, what we offer are our promises to serve others. Sometimes that can look like the giving of money. I think you know that servitude so often involves us, our whole beings, much more frequently than just our wallets – our time, our skills. Giving to God naturally means not saving for ourselves, means sacrificing something we would want to keep for ourselves. There is a distinction to be made here. Professor James J. Thompson points out, "self-sacrifice must not become self-denial as an end in itself. Self-sacrifice for a disciple of Jesus Christ must be in the service of something higher than the self."¹ This fits pledging. This fits Lenten disciplines. This fits our whole posture as Christians. Today and any day we make an offering to God, the aim should not simply be to make an offering but to do so for the sake of our continual efforts to bridge the gap between this world and heaven.

That is our promise and our pledge which we proclaim in our prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Our pledge cards say "To you, O God, I humbly give back my gift of time / talent / treasure." We each have a very specific way (or ways) we feel is the way to service something higher than us. In Roger's case, in part in his retirement, that was as an alderman. In Roger's case, that took time and talent. As you prepare to fill out your card, if you haven't already, ask first what

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 192.

specific way (or ways) do you seek to service something higher than yourself. How is it that **you** feel equipped to bridge the gap between earth and heaven? What do **you** offer to bring heaven nearer?

Let us pray: O God, we seek to make our lives complete offerings pleasing to you. Find them worthy, we pray. Amen.