

“Served or Serving?”

Albert Schweitzer said, **“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve.”** (Albert Schweitzer according to www.Sermons.com)

Napoleon said, “Alexander, Caesar, and Hannibal conquered the world but had no friends. ... Jesus founded his empire upon love, and at this hour millions would die for him. ... He has won the hearts of men, a task a conqueror cannot do.” (Napoleon according to www.Sermons.com)

The actions and words of the Zebedee brothers in the report shared in today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading provided Jesus with an important opportunity to reveal a crucial aspect of his own mission and purpose to his disciples. Our Call To Worship printed in our Worship Bulletin today from the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples as reported in the Gospel of John 13 was another important teaching moment on the same subject. In that Scripture, on the last evening of his earthly life, Jesus revealed the same message very graphically in conjunction with washing the feet of his disciples. Although Jesus communicated his message and call to his disciples on multiple occasions, many folks, who consider themselves to be Christians in the present, seem to be oblivious to the teaching Jesus shared in today’s Scripture and in John 13.

Clearly, James and John did not give much consideration to what would be the response of the other original disciples as they asked Jesus in **verse 37**, **“When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left.”** In a similar way, many persons, especially those who are wealthy, seem clueless about what Jesus called and calls his disciples to do with reference to being served or serving!

Donald L. Deffner shared a story, which demonstrates the difficulty many people have with the concept of service. Deffner said, “A well-dressed European woman was on safari in Africa. The group stopped briefly at a hospital for lepers. The heat was intense, the flies buzzing. She noticed a nurse bending down in the dirt, tending to the pus-filled sores of a leper.

With disdain the woman remarked, ‘Why, I wouldn’t do that for all the money in the world!’

The nurse quietly replied, ‘Neither would I.’” (Donald L. Deffner, Seasonal Illustrations p. 130) A follower, who responds to Jesus’ call to serve, does not do it in order to become rich from doing the service! That may be hard to accept, just as it was extremely difficult for the disciples to accept Jesus’ teaching on rich people and the odds against them entering the Kingdom of God in last Sunday’s Gospel Lectionary Reading.

Let’s consider Katherine Fagerburg’s following description, “Talk show host John Calloway interviewed the editor of The Christian Century. Calloway asked James Wall, ‘What do you think made Jimmy Carter so effective as an international negotiator?’ Wall replied, ‘Carter has the prestige and experience of the presidency without the political baggage. Furthermore, he is able to draw on his personal, deeply held religious belief that in talking with another person, one must be sensitive to the other’s perspective.’

Calloway responded, ‘You are really saying that it is the one without power who really has power.’”

Fagerburg explained, **“That is closer to what Christ taught, that power is sometimes manifested in weakness, in giving oneself to others. Authentic greatness is redefined to mean serving instead of being served, using the power of love rather than seeking power and control.”** Fagerburg concluded, “In the kingdom of God, we do not attain prominence by getting our bids in first, or by elbowing our way to the front. Prominence comes as we serve others with humility. (Katherine Fagerburg, Redefining Greatness)

In verse 38 of today’s Reading, “Jesus said to them (meaning James and John), ‘You don’t know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?’ Not too surprising, James and John responded in the first part of **verse 39**, **“We can.”**

Drinking the “cup of suffering” and being baptized in the way Jesus would be baptized may sound very confusing! To understand what he was saying to James and John, we need to remember Jesus’ suffering and his death – his

baptism are crucial examples of his suffering service. **In the later part of verse 39 and verse 40, “Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God Who will give these places to those for whom He has prepared them.’”**

James and John should not have been surprised by the reaction of the other disciples after the brothers tried to get Jesus to give them the positions of highest authority and power in his Fulfilled Kingdom. **In verse 41, Mark reported, “When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John.”** I suspect the main reason the remaining original disciples were unhappy was James and John beat them in making the request of Jesus for positions of power! That raises the question of why James and John felt confident enough to ask Jesus for that special favor. My expectation is they were Jesus’ cousins and especially John, as the youngest, was very much like a kid brother to him.

Jesus recognized his disciples needed to be united, instead of divided into competing groups and they needed to be liberated from their egotistical desires of being served, instead of serving. **In verses 42 - 44, Mark explained, “So Jesus called them all together to him and said, ‘You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all.’”**

Rev. B. Kris Kramer shared the following story to illustrate Jesus’ point, “During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help them. Asked why by the rider, he retorted with great dignity, ‘Sir, I am a corporal!’ The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, ‘Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again.’ With that George Washington got back on horse and rode off.”

Kramer asked, “Where did Washington learn such leadership skills?” He continued, “I have no doubt he learned them here. In these words of Jesus: ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.’ The young corporal had these words modeled to him from the man at the top.” Kramer concluded, **“The disciples, likewise, receive from their leader a picture of servant hood.”** (“The Three Poison Pills of Position, Prestige, and Power” by Rev. B. Kris Kramer)

What might be the type of service Jesus called his followers to fulfill? Roger Dow and Susan Cook have shared the following account as one expression of such loving service, “A room-service waiter at a Marriott Hotel learned that the sister of a guest had just died. The waiter, named Charles, bought a sympathy card, had hotel staff members sign it, and gave it to the distraught guest with a piece of hot apple pie.

‘Mr. Marriott,’ the guest later wrote to the president of Marriott Hotels, ‘I’ll never meet you. And I don’t need to meet you. Because I met Charles. I know what you stand for. ... I want to assure you that as long as I live, I will stay at your hotels. And I will tell my friends to stay at your hotels.’” (Roger Dow and Susan Cook, “Turned On”, [New York: Harper Business, 1996].)

Jesus brought his teaching on service to a conclusion and put forth the strongest argument for it when he said in verse 45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.” Jesus knew what his fate would be in Jerusalem, nevertheless, he intentionally kept moving toward his death. As he went forth to face his mission and purpose, he kept calling his disciples to follow his example.

Kathryn Matthews (Huey) suggests, “But we contemporary followers of Jesus, Zebedee brothers in our own place and time, hear the same call, and the same offer, that our ancestors did long ago. Will we follow all the way to Jerusalem, and the cross, and the rising again?” (“Great Service/Power to Serve” reflection by Kathryn Matthews (Huey) on Weekly Seeds.)

So, we come back to the basic question. **Will you and I seek to be served or to serve? Let us go forward to follow Jesus’ call to serve one another!** Amen.