

Sermon Title *To serve, not to be served*

Mark 10:35-45 (The Message)

Narrator:³⁵ James and John, Zebedee's sons, came up to him.

James & JOHN: “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us.”

Jesus:³⁶ “What is it? I'll see what I can do.”

JOHN:³⁷ “Arrange it, so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory—

James: one of us to sit at your right,

JOHN: the other at your left.”

Jesus:³⁸ “You have no idea what you're asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I'm about to be plunged into?”

James: “Sure,”

JOHN: “Why not?”

Jesus: “Come to think of it, you *will* drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that's not my business. There are other arrangements for that.”

Narrator: When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down.

Jesus: “You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Humanity has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.

For Reflection:

“Our humanity comes to its fullest bloom in giving. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, a word of love, a present, a part of our life...all of our life. Our greatest fulfillment lies in giving ourselves to others.”

— Henri J.M. Nouwen

Jesus is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne: he is a servant through and through.

— Barbara Brown Taylor

In their efforts to get young adults to give a year or two of their life in service, Mennonite Mission Network says, “Give yourself, gain everything.” That is a good tag-line, and it is true.



And, what is also true, is one Dorothy Day’s favorite quotes which came from the author Dostoevski, “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing when compared to love in dreams.”
Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.

In the year 2000 a woman named Connie was paroled from the Women’s prison near my parent’s home in Lincoln, Nebraska. Connie had met a Mennonite in prison, a faithful volunteer Nadine who went to the prison every week to spend time with some of the women there. Thus, upon her release, Connie called up the only Mennonite Church in Lincoln to explain a bit of her situation and ask if there might be any Mennonite women who would be willing to help mentor her as she transitioned back to life on the outside. It was asked in “joys and concerns” one Sunday, would anyone be interested in meeting Connie and considering this. My mom talked to our pastor Steve afterward, and soon Connie and her three children became part of our family. Seventeen

years later, they are still close – Connie calls my mom almost everyday. This decision of my mom has no doubt changed the course of my nuclear family, and Connie's, forever. To the casual observer, this is a success story.

In those seventeen years, my parents have walked with Connie through a 4th pregnancy; my dad has spent many hours tutoring her as she pursued various degrees and certifications; they have seen her through marriage and divorce; they have moved her at least ten times; she has lived in their basement; they have helped her financially on countless occasions, they have been Emergency Foster parents to two of her Grandchildren; they have been guardians for two of her sons when she recently decided she didn't want to be a parent anymore and moved to Florida; and for the past two years, they have become the parents to one of her Grandchildren.

No, I don't know if I would call it a success story, but I would call it a love story. *Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.*

James and John come to Jesus to ask him for something. Power. They have felt it and been drawn to it – it is probably why they left their father and boats behind to follow Jesus in the first place, they sensed that there was something different about this man – he has some aura, some power they could sense and feel. What they want from Jesus, it turns out, are high-ranking cabinet appointments. When the fullness of Jesus' kingdom comes, they want to sit as close to Jesus as they can: as we know, the further in the middle of the picture you are, the more important; the closer you are standing or sitting in relation to the king, the more important you must be.

The beautiful thing about their request is that they believe that Jesus will prevail – that in the end, Jesus will reign. Thus, what they miss of course, is what that will look like. And when

that time comes, James and John want a cushy appointment. They want to be rewarded for joining the team early. They want influence. They want to be near the source of power.

This is the approach that many Christian leaders have taken, especially in our country – wanting to have access to power and influence, particularly political power. In our sustained belief in hierarchy, Christian leaders have sought to influence the people at the seat of American power,



believing that if we can just influence that seat, that person, they can help bring the kingdom of God – that they can help shape, what many still think of as a Christian nation. It hasn't mattered who that leader was, we have continued to try to pull our seat as close to that center of power as possible –



we have allowed our prophetic voice to be lulled to sleep by prayer breakfasts, meetings in the mayor's office and the oval office; by being asked to pray before the start of a legislative session (ironically, just before the reciting of the 'Pledge of Allegiance.'). We have hope that our views on morality and justice might trickle-down from the top, if we just have enough influence.

Jesus, of course, tells James and John – and tells all of us who, in the name of Jesus, try to pull-up our chair next to the one in power – Jesus reminds us that the one who is great is the one who serves – whoever wants to be first among you must be a servant to all. The problem is that we have heard this teaching so many times that it is all but lost on us. That in the kingdom of God: *The end of the line is the best place to be – the first shall be last and the last first – to be great, we must be a servant to all.* They have just become words that Christians say, and even worse, words that people like me say, the people who are up in-front, usually elevated on some type of literal pedestal – telling others that the place to be is on the bottom and at the back of line. These words are almost incomprehensible in terms of the world we live in.

I would say that we have largely turned these words into a strategy, that if we serve for awhile we will work our ways up to the real power where we might have some influence. Like James and John, we sort of believe, if we put our efforts into following the right person humbly for awhile, it will eventually pay off. And of course, who can blame us for hoping that loving service will not be our entire lives, because it is a harsh and dreadful thing – it is messy and takes us to places we would rather not be; loving service breaks our hearts and wakes us up in the middle of the night. It is much cleaner at the top – people where nice suits and sit in comfortable chairs, and people ask you if they can get you anything while you wait.

As a society we believe loving service is something we do to check off our twenty-hours for National Honor Society, for a week-long trip in High School, or it is something we do for a year or two after college – before we start our “real job”. Even in the non-profit world where service is what we do, we rarely pay those who are doing the direct service a liveable wage, so those who are great at working with people end up trying to be managers so they can have enough to live on.

James and John, they are still waiting for Jesus to reveal himself and take over the throne. But, Jesus is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne: he is a servant through and through. The good seats are not his to give. He does not even have one himself.¹ In the kingdom of God, it is not, do your time as a servant for awhile and then move up. It is the way of life. We don't do the hard stuff for just long enough so that we can write our book or be consultants – we do it because that is what we do. It is what life in the kingdom looks like, love in action. Loving service.

Our belief in hierarchy is so cemented into place that we even talk about heaven as a hierarchy – when people do an act of service or something no one else wants to do, we sometimes joke saying, “that is another jewel for your crown in heaven”, imagining that even in heaven there will be ranks and power distinctions. I wonder if perhaps those who were the most faithful here on earth, when they get to heaven, Saint Peter won't be waiting with a crown but with a mop or plunger, saying, “keep up the good work.”

¹ From Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon “The Trickle-Up Effect” in [Bread of Angels](#).

At the very end of this passage Jesus says, “For the Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve, *and to give his life a ransom for many.*” Probably for most of us here, we got the “came not to be served but to serve part” – we believe in this, at least in our heads we know this is true, that we are to serve; that “it is better to give than get” and all those things. But then we hear that final line, “to give his life a ransom for many.” And, if you are like me, the tapes that turn on in your head are those of traditional views of atonement, traditional views of how Jesus saves us. But perhaps, says David Lose, we need to hear these words of Jesus giving himself “as a ransom for many” – *not* as Jesus buying us back from God’s wrath or from the devil (both ideas which are problematic), but instead as paying himself out in order to *rescue us from our delusion of power* – from our delusion of putting our hope in the hierarchies of humanity – to rescue us from our terrible love of power.



Even though we seek to follow behind one who knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples – the one who gave himself away in self-sacrificial love – we still have hope in the old power structures, they still tempt us. But I think this is one of the things Jesus was trying to rescue us from – to save our world from – the terrible effects of worshipping power, of seeking power. That the kingdom of God is not about getting to the top or making change from the top – the kingdom of God lives and dwells in loving and humble service. The kingdom of God is not

about trying to buddy up to those in power, but about trying to buddy up with those who have no power. For perhaps that is where we will find our own salvation, in our own rescue from the delusions of our culture and our time – to be saved from our terrible love of power.

I have been saved from this. When I started out my official theological education, my dreams were to be the pastor of a large church. I wanted to be a name. Not too big, not to be an American Christian name, just a Mennonite name – that most Mennonites would have heard of me. But I was saved from this, by an eleven year old boy with autism. I was saved to believe not in power, but in relationship.

But it continues to tempt us – it continues to draw us into thinking we can make change if we just get close enough to the top.



Here in these pictures, I was part of this delegation to meet with Congressman Labrador to talk about immigration reform – I was the Idaho constituent to allow a meeting between Jim Wallis (CEO of Sojourners – one of the leading Christian voices of justice and love in action) and Congressman Labrador. And we have a lively debate and disagreement about immigration reform – we have completely different worldviews on this. And then after the meeting, why do

we have to take a picture to put on our social media pages to show, “look at the good work we are doing – look how close we got to this seat of power.” It just feels a little gross to me.

Jesus is not in it for a reward, and certainly not for the recognition. He is in it for love – for the love of God, for the love of humanity, for the love of the world – Jesus is in this for love. Love, which promises him nothing but the opportunity to give himself away; love promises us nothing but the promise of openness and vulnerability. Loving service is not a strategy, it is the way of God, it is the way of God’s kingdom. Loving service is not a way to the top. It is the way. Loving service, it is a harsh and dreadful thing. It is a beautiful and life-saving thing.

Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of Life go with you –
opening us to those places where we still love and serve power – and empowering us to chose the*

beautiful and difficult way of love in action –

that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Go in peace. Amen.