

Service and Self Denial

Mark 10:32-45

One thing in this narrative is very clear: James and John thought that the self-sacrifice and pain which Jesus was preparing to endure and which he was calling his followers to endure was only a means to an end. It was simply something he and they would have to endure in order to secure the kingdom in which they would have power rather than vulnerability, prominence rather than lowliness, honor rather than humiliation. Being servants, they thought, was an unfortunate step they would have to take in order to become masters.

What Jesus knew and what those disciples would, in time, come to understand, was that the way of servanthood and self-sacrifice is not the way to a different kind of life. It is itself the life of God.

I was reared, as most of you were, in a tradition that has placed more emphasis upon the triumph of Jesus than upon the humiliation of Jesus, more emphasis upon the victorious Christ than upon the suffering Christ. In fact, we made an important thing of the fact that the crosses that were found in our Lutheran churches were empty, in contrast to the crosses in Roman Catholic Churches which bore the pierced and bleeding body of Jesus.

Well, without disclaiming the tradition in which I am steeped and in which I stand I am reclaiming that other tradition which vividly reminds us that the self-giving and suffering of Jesus Christ is a lasting and eternal aspect of who Jesus is.

From the time he was in the 7th grade until he graduated from high school, John went to church camp for a week every summer with around one hundred other young people from Lutheran churches in Iowa. His first summer at junior high camp he discovered that at the end of the week the campers all selected one person as the best camper of the week, and that person got some kind of award. The next summer he decided he wanted to win that award. For the whole week he went out of his way to put other people first. When somebody struck out in a softball game, he gave him or her a word of encouragement when others were criticizing. At the table he made sure the person next to him got a piece of chicken before he took one. He put other people's ideas ahead of his own when they were working on a skit for the talent show. It worked. He was elected the best camper. It was a great feeling. A few hours after the assembly and shortly before they all left for home, the DCE from his home church, a young woman whom he really liked and admired, took him aside and said that she earnestly hoped that he would not let that honor go to his head, that he would remember that the kind of unselfish and considerate behavior he had displayed for a week was the kind of behavior God wanted from him all the time. It was a very sobering message.

But let me emphasize again that God does not want us to be unselfish and self-sacrificing as a means to an end. God wants us to be that way because that is, in and of itself, abundant life.

In his book, *Magnificent Obsession*, Lloyd C. Douglas told the story of a young man who was living a spoiled and useless life. One day we woke up and learned that he had almost drowned and that a great brain surgeon who lived on the nearby lake had himself drowned in the rescue effort that saved him.

Moved by what his life had cost the world, the young man resolved that he would himself become a neurosurgeon and give back to the world what he had taken. He succeeded in that, but he discovered that there was more to the life of the older doctor than medicine. He discovered that that man had given himself to hundreds of people in different ways. To some he had given money. To others he had given time. To others he had donated his skill. And for every deed of this kind he had exacted one promise only....that never in his lifetime would the recipient reveal that fact of his help. For the young man that philosophy and that example became a magnificent obsession. And he found that the more he poured out the more he found to pour out. The more he gave himself for others, the more he himself received.

Two chapters earlier than our text in Mark 10, Jesus put it this way, “If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever loses their life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it.” Frances of Assisi, who took Jesus seriously and found what Jesus said to be true, put it this way in his famous prayer:

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

But let us look again at the text in Mark 10. Jesus said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave to all. For the son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Where does that leave an appropriate kind of assertiveness? There are all kinds of people whose personalities have been stunted and whose lives have been anything but abundant because they have allowed themselves to be dominated by their parents or browbeaten by their spouses or exploited by their employees or intimidated by their peers. They have heard the apostle Paul say that they should “count others better” than themselves and have heard Jesus say that they should “Be slave of all,” and they have concluded that it would be unseemly or un-Christian to assert themselves.

What they have done...what you may have done if you tend in this direction...is confuse self-denial with victimization. Victimization is something that is done to you to your detriment and against your will. The kind of self-denial to which Paul and Jesus call us is intentional, fulfilling and free. Even with respect to his death, Jesus made it clear that he was not the victim. In John 10 Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

Your decision in a business meeting, or church meeting or political meeting not to respond in kind to a rude put-down is an example of being victimized if you are simply afraid or feel that you are powerless to respond. But if your non-retaliation comes from an intentional, free decision to absorb the hurt in order not to escalate tension and hostility, it may be an excellent example of the kind of self-denial Jesus calls you to practice.

Proverbs 15:1 puts it in a nutshell: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

But practicing this kind of self-denial is really painful as we all know. It is painful not to respond in kind when your parent is shouting at you. It is painful to listen, without exploding, to the sarcasm in your teenager's voice. To treat another person's political opinions with respect when that person treats yours with derision and even contempt is really painful.

But this is exactly the kind of concrete, day to day self-denial and servanthood God holds out to us as full of real life. Jesus models it for us; treating with respect Roman soldiers who mocked him, spit on him, scourged him and killed him; remaining faithful and loving toward friends who forsook him and fled; magnanimously attributing the sins of all of us, not to our sorriness, but to our ignorance, and praying earnestly, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

If we had only the words of an authoritative leader who said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant,” we would not have the Gospel. As true as it might be, it would not be good news because we would not be able to obey.

The Gospel is that we have not only the words of an authoritative leader but the work of a loving leader who practiced what he preached, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” That “many” includes you and me,,,,,,,,, and by attaching ourselves to him and not just to what he said we can grow in our desire and our capacity to practice the self-denial and servanthood of which life consists. Let us pray.

O Lord, you have called us and we are yours. Send us out again and again knowing that the place of honor is at the foot of the cross. We give you thanks that we are joined to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Make us a servant church, open our eyes and our hearts to the needs around us and keep us close to you. By your grace we pray that you would continue to make us bold. Make us willing and able to follow you. Make us willing and able to go where you will send us. Help us to trust that you are there to meet us wherever we go. O Lord, in your name we pray. Amen.