

**On Being a Servant**  
**Isaiah 42:1-9    Mark 10:32-45**

**Mark 10:32-45**

32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup>saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; <sup>34</sup>they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.' (this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> time he has said this to them)

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.' <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' <sup>38</sup>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?' <sup>39</sup>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; <sup>40</sup>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. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles ("nations") those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

This is the word of the Lord.

I recently heard the story of a man who drove through a thunder and lightning storm on his way home from work, and his car was struck by lightning (a car is actually a safe place to be if you're struck by lightning, so he wasn't injured—just very startled!). When he arrives home and begins to share his ordeal with his family, hoping to receive at least some sympathy from them, one of his kids stops him and says, "Hey dad, let's go buy a lottery ticket." "What?! Why??" I heard that our odds of winning the lottery are the same as getting struck by lightning, so our chances are good right now."

In our gospel account this morning, James and John similarly seem to miss what Jesus has been telling them, when they come to him saying, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Let's stop there for a moment. That's pretty bold, wouldn't you say? Their sentence doesn't even end with a question mark. More like an exclamation point. They didn't ask, "Could you do something for us?" Didn't even use the nice word... No, this is more like a demand: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask." It's one thing to be confident, and even bold, in prayer. It's another thing to be obnoxious. Jesus goes with it, though. And he politely responds: "So... what do you want me to do for you?" (*his sentence ends with a question mark...*).

“We want cabinet posts in your new administration, when you take over,” they say. “Especially prominent cabinet posts; in fact, we’d like to be vice Messiahs.”

It is surprising, isn’t it, that they still don’t get it, and obviously don’t get what they’re getting into, even after Jesus has told them, three times now, what is to happen once they arrive in Jerusalem, and, after being told to receive the Kingdom humbly like children, as we heard last week. *That* lesson obviously didn’t sink in either. So Jesus asks, “Are you able to drink the cup I’m about to drink, and be baptized with the same baptism I’m about to experience?” Which is a way of asking, “Will you be able to stomach this? Will you be able to endure being immersed in suffering and adversity?”

Without hesitation they say, “We are able.” Of course you are. So able, that you scattered like the wind on Good Friday after Jesus was arrested, and you ran away in fear.

As Jesus points out, they didn’t know what they were asking. I’ll talk about this more next week, because today’s account is going to overlap with what happens next in Mark’s gospel. Stay tuned!

The other 10 are indignant, but only because they want the same thing, but don't have the guts to request it, like James and John did. Their ego is revealed by their reaction to James and John.

Seeing all of this, Jesus takes advantage of this teachable moment, as he often does, and has a few words for his apprentices...

Jesus points to the "worldly" order of things, where leaders grab power and lord it over others. He calls them tyrants. Sound familiar? Know anyone who fits that description in worldly affairs today? Not just in national or international *governmental* affairs, but in business, and even in social services or other non-profit organizations. Even churches! In spite of what Jesus teaches.

What is it about this human tendency to want to grab power, or lord it over others?

In this account, and the instances where this happens in our world, there is an ambition gone to excess that reminds me of Yertle the Turtle from Dr. Seuss. Remember him? Yertle is king of the Turtles. He enjoys his pond and effectively governs it; but power corrupts, and Yertle craves more. So he constructs his throne, confident that he will be able to rule over everything he can see. His throne, however, is made of... the other turtles!

That story is as much about others standing up for themselves, and about the responsibility we have toward others, but Yertle provides a nice “James and John” kind of lesson in the quest for power, and of ambition gone to excess.

However, notice: Jesus doesn’t squelch ambition. He doesn’t tell James and John or the others that their desire for leadership or for greatness is bad. He doesn’t tell them they shouldn’t desire that. Jesus is brilliant here because he actually *affirms* ambition. And he does that by *redefining* greatness. He redefines leadership. He says, “*If you want to be great,*” here is what it looks like. He affirms their energy and their core desire; just not their motives, or their image of what greatness is, which had become conflated with their egos.

Because true greatness is defined *by God*, and it looks like servanthood, and humility. True greatness is defined by God, not the world, and it is God who is our audience, so to speak, not others. James and John (and presumably the rest of the disciples) think that the crowds, or the other followers, are their audience. Just like any person today might think that a group of followers, or fanatics are their audience. But Jesus is saying that if we want to be truly great (*in God’s eyes*, that’s the subtext here), then we must choose humility and service. God sees those others—the great ones, the tyrants—God sees them too, and God is not

impressed. In God's order of things, in God's kingdom, the last are first, the first are last, and those who serve are great.

Along those lines, notice that Jesus doesn't fuss too much over what is happening out there in the world, with rulers and "great ones" and leaders who lord it over others and act as tyrants. He acknowledges that it happens; he is realistic and aware that bad leaders happen to good societies, but he doesn't lecture *them*, or go into an outrage about them. In some ways he is almost dismissive of them, the way he was with king Herod, the way he will be with Pontius Pilate and the other authorities that he will be confronted by during Holy Week.

It doesn't mean that he doesn't care about good governance, and about justice. Of course he does. It's that his focus is elsewhere—on his disciples; or we might say, his church. He says, in a short, potent sentence: "It shall not be so *among you*." Let's pause for a moment again, here, and let those words sink in: it shall not be so among you. For me, this is the most important, powerful, impactful sentence. It shall not be so among you. You see what's happening out there, and I see it too. And I want make it clear that what's happening out there *will not* happen among you. In my church.

This is one clear and unequivocal place where Jesus indicates that Christian community, that his church, his Way, the practice of discipleship, is going to be counter to, alternative to, the way that “the world” does things. It will be, to repeat an oft used (but accurate) phrase, counter-cultural. Where being servants is the way to greatness, and where servanthood is the norm—especially for leaders.

This dialogue, and the teaching from Jesus suggests the shape of the church’s discipleship. Jesus teaches an alternative to the domination system that is pervasive in the world’s leadership and power structures.

But oh, how the Church has struggled with this over the centuries. As, from time to time, church leaders allow their ego run the show, and become intoxicated with power and popularity, instead of trying to follow the example of Jesus, who—as the apostle Paul says in Philippians—gave up power, literally “emptied himself,” and became a servant.

So Jesus is issuing a warning here. Remember the old tv show, Lost in Space? With the robot who could sense potential danger, and he would wave his arms and say, “Danger Will Robinson!” That’s kind of what Jesus is doing here. Maybe it’s insulting to compare Jesus to a 1960’s version of a space robot, but that’s just how my mind works sometimes!

So Jesus is issuing a warning here.

But he is also giving a great encouragement. And the encouragement is: Anyone can be great, because anyone can be a servant. If God defines greatness as being a servant, then anyone can be great.

I was reminded this week of a gracious man named Max DePree. Max was the Chairman of the Board and CEO of Herman Miller, a company that made office furniture starting back in the 1960's. If you ever worked in an office, you probably sat in a Herman Miller chair at some point, or your workplace used their furniture. Max became known as an innovator in that industry, and built Herman Miller to become a Fortune 500 company. However, I became acquainted with Max DePree because he was on the board of trustees for Fuller Seminary, where Heidi and I went, and I came to know him as a devout Christian man and one of the kindest people you ever met (and I did get to meet him once when the trustees were in town in Pasadena, CA). Max wrote a number of books about leadership that helped shape my life and the lives and leadership practices of many people I know. Books like *Leadership Jazz*, *Leadership is an Art*, and *Leading Without Power*. That title alone says something about Max and how he viewed his role in leadership at Herman Miller, and at Fuller.



One of my favorite Max DePree stories is that he, as CEO and chairman of the board, would, once a week, pack a sack lunch and go down onto the factory floor where the furniture was being made, and invite anyone who wanted to, to come and have lunch with him, and talk about whatever *they* wanted to. Sometimes their conversations were about the employees and their families (he was on a first name basis with many of the workers), sometimes they were about furniture design, and sometimes they talked about the movies they watched last weekend. He invited feedback from the people who were literally on the ground in the business, and he simply listened. It was there, he said, that a young woman told him that Herman Miller's maternity leave policy was bad and insufficient. And so, he changed it so that young women who were starting families got the time they needed to nurture their baby. This was in the 1970's. It was there on the factory floor that he learned from black American employees about their experiences of the horrors of racism. And so, he re-wrote policies to ensure that no one, at this company at least, would be discriminated against. And on it goes.

Here was a man (he died 5 years ago at age 92) who could've remained in his comfortable ivory tower, doing executive things all day and all week, but who chose to routinely go where the hard-working people were, sack lunch in hand, and meet them where they are.

What does it mean to be a servant? What does servanthood look like? I'm hesitant to say, because there is no specific list of things to do, no formula to follow. Servanthood has more to do with intent and attitude. It has to do with a desire to see and help others flourish, and not care who gets the credit or is in the spotlight.

Being a servant means not asking for or expecting anything in return. Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "If you help someone and expect something in return, you're not doing good, you're doing business." That's transactional and not relational.

Servanthood involves sacrifice, and, as Jesus indicates in his response to James and John, servanthood may also include suffering.

Of course, Jesus is the model and example of greatness and servanthood, as he said, "The son of man came not to be served, but to serve." And he modeled this on Maundy Thursday, in washing the disciples' feet (where he said, "I have set you an example... Go and do likewise"). I don't think we'll see any presidential candidates washing anyone's feet this year. Or anyone running for office for that matter.

But here is Jesus, setting an example on that night, and on the following day, as he lays down his life.

As you heard in the reading from Isaiah, Jesus is known as “the suffering servant.” Who offered a suffering service to the world.

May we, his church, offer the same love, the same service, to our neighbors.