

A Servant's Heart

Mark 10:35-45

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost/ October 21, 2018

“A visible sign of an invisible grace.” That’s how the great theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430) gave us one of the best definitions of a sacrament that we have. “A visible sign of an invisible grace.”

As we know, most Protestants celebrate two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper; our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters consider five additional acts or rites as sacramental. But if we used Augustine’s definition to guide us, there may be many signs that make grace visible to us. If we were to add to the list of sacraments—I’m not suggesting that we do so, but *if we did*—perhaps Protestants and Roman Catholics, as well as Orthodox Christians, would all agree that acts of *service* can also be sacramental. Why? *Because service, when done in love, can also be signs of God’s grace and reign in the world. Service, when done in love and joy, can convey to the world, like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, that God is near.*

A sacrament allows the invisible grace of God to become visible, even tangible in our lives. Sacraments allow something of God to come into focus, become more accessible to our senses and therefore more *real*. We experience this in baptism and in the Lord’s Supper, but the definition works for any moment, any activity that reveals the presence and love of God.

Isn’t this what Jesus is saying here, much to the consternation, frustration and confusion of the disciples? “Whoever wishes to be great among you must become your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (or servant) of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

A statement such as this must have confused and troubled the disciples. For us, perhaps these words are familiar; maybe too familiar. They sound, well, so...*Christian*. Don’t they? Jesus as servant. Jesus as servant of all. The Christian is called to serve. That’s what we do (or, at least, what we’re supposed to do): we serve one another. For some, this is what it means to be Christian. Christians do good in the world. Christians do nice things for people. It’s the Christian thing to do.

We need to put some caution around this. Christians need to remember that Christians don’t have the market on doing good. Being a follower of Jesus is about more than trying to be a good person. Simply doing good does not a Christian make. What Jesus is saying here, what he’s expecting from his disciples requires something more than a willingness to do good.

Just before we read about James and John asking to be the teacher’s pet, their teacher tells them, “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; they will mock him, and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three

days rise again” (10:33-34). *Then* we find James and John, not paying attention, not listening—or listening, but not hearing, ignoring, denying what he said—but instead asking Jesus for a favored position when he sits in glory. There’s only room for two, they think, one on the left and one on the right.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Jesus says. *You really don’t know what you’re asking, do you? You have no idea. You have no idea what I’m about, do you?*

Sure, we do. Pick us. You’ll see. We’re better than the others.

When the others heard James and John, they became angry. So Jesus called them all aside and said, look, “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.”

You know that among the Gentiles... Who is Jesus talking about here? Who are the rulers of the Gentiles? The *Roman* governor. He’s also the ruler of the Jews because the Roman Empire occupies Palestine. You know how the Romans operate, Jesus says, their rulers lord it over them and subjugate everyone, including their “great ones,” which is probably a veiled reference here to the Emperor himself.

How does Rome act? With brute force and power. Those at the top have all the power; those at the bottom have none. Those on the bottom only exist to serve those on the top. Those without power are destined to serve those with power—and those at the bottom are powerless to do anything about it. Those with more honor, more glory, more power expect to be served by those with less, by those who are beneath them. That is the Roman way.

But it’s just not the Roman way. There’s something oddly familiar about all this, isn’t there? It’s a human way, a fallen, sinful way, the way of false ambition and the almost Darwinian struggle to be on top of the heap, to be the best, to have the place of honor, the recognition of the crowd, the glory. If we’re honest, there’s something of James and John in each of us. We each have our ego needs and we look to wealth, power, influence, rank, position, achievements, authority, honor, glory, and status to help prop up our fragile egos. To be clear, wealth, power, influence, etc., are not inherently bad, but they can easily become hurtful and destructive, petty and small, ugly and dishonoring, toxic, even evil if all we’re worrying about is our ego needs, if we’re only worrying about ourselves, if we *use* people and power and privilege—and yes, even religion (!)—to get ahead in the world.

“But it is not so among you,” Jesus says.

One of the wisest and most honest writers I know is Parker Palmer, a Quaker, an educator, philosopher. Early in his career he was offered the presidency of a small educational institution. He wanted the job, and he thought he should take it. He gathered a half-dozen trusted friends and formed what’s called in the Quaker tradition a “clearness committee.” A clearness committee helps one discern what the Quakers call *way*, helps one determine whether “way” is clear or closed. They gathered around him, not to offer advice, but to ask honest, open-ended questions of Palmer to help him discern the call.

Halfway through this three-hour meeting a friend asked Palmer what he would like most about being president. He mentioned several things he wouldn't enjoy, like wearing a tie. But one friend said, you're not answering the question. Palmer says he then "gave an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it: 'Well,' I said, in the smallest voice I possess, 'I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it.'" Palmer shares, "I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence—a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly grow. Finally, my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up—and cracked me open: 'Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?' By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life."¹ That moment of clarity led him to withdraw his name from the search.

"But it is not so among you...."

When Jesus offers these words he's leading his disciples down an entirely different path. It's not the way our selfish, fearful egos usually want to go. It's not the way that comes naturally to us. And it's certainly not the way one chooses to go if one's ego is fragile and insecure, when it's full of worry and anxiety, when the ego "dominates, exploits, and manipulates others for its own advantage."²

"But it is not so among you...."

If you want to be considered great in the kingdom of God, you must become servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant or slave of all. Jesus is talking about *mutual* servant-hood here, one serving the other, seeking to serve the other; one who does not seek to "lord it over" the other. Equal to equal.

But how? Jesus didn't have to grab for glory or wealth or power or authority or status in order to affirm who he was. He knew, in his heart, who he was. In the absolute best sense of the phrase, *Jesus was truly full of himself*, that is, clear about his identity and purpose. And it's from that state of fullness, of completion, knowing that he was participating in the love and generosity of God that he was then *free*—not compelled, but free—to serve and to give.

I believe that the way of Jesus is available to us through him. From Jesus' perspective, "only the strongest sense of self, a self that neither grovels nor grasps, can resist chasing counterfeit notions of greatness."³ When we have a strong sense of self, of who we really are as children of God, value who we are at the core of our being, deeper than our egos, when we have awareness of who we are in all of *our* fullness as children of God, then we are free to serve and give in a new way, we are even free to give ourselves away.

When we serve and give in this way—when we see it happening toward others, when we're the ones doing it, when we're the ones receiving this kind of generosity—it becomes and looks and feels *sacramental*. There's something holy and good about it. Something of God is present in those moments because that is the way God is, that's how it's done. And, I believe, it's possible for us to live and serve this way, not by our own will and determination alone, but

when we know who we are, when our identity is firmly grounded in the One who created us, loves us, redeems us, and empowers us to act.

Whether we're putting together Safe Motherhood Kits for IMA World Health, collecting food for CEFM, preparing Thanksgiving dinners with Grace AME Church, walking in a CROP Walk, advocating for justice and fairness, transforming the world through our Envision Fund, clearing weeds from the Woodland Sanctuary, loving a Syrian refugee family, making the world safe for our children, baking and selling cookies for the Santi School in Nepal, sitting beside someone who is scared, lending an open ear and an open heart, or giving space and time to the things and people that really matter." We are serving.

Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-45). Jesus had a servant's heart. To love him, to follow him is to serve him. And we serve him today in serving one another. When we serve in love because of the One who loves us, then service *becomes* sacramental. In those moments we know that God is at work in us and through us. In those moments we know that God is near. We become visible signs of invisible grace—and we experience joy. The Lebanese Christian poet Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) said it beautifully: "I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy. I woke and I saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy."

¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 44-46. I'm relying on Daniel D. Clendenin's helpful summary of Palmer's account found on his website Journey with Jesus: <http://journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20121015JJ.shtml>.

² Clendenin, <http://journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20121015JJ.shtml>.

³ Clendenin makes this point here, <http://journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20121015JJ.shtml>.