

Mark 10:42-45 (NRSV)

⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, "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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

James 2:14-26 (TNIV)

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.

²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Today, we come to the seventh and final holy habit: serving. In this, we follow our Master and Lord, who came not to be served but to serve.

I can remember when "servant leader" was the management slogan of the day. It generated countless books, conferences, and consultants. We were supposed to turn the organization chart upside down or do away with it altogether. We were told that CEOs were there to serve not to be served. Collaboration, trust, and empathy were the goals. I'm sure that some organizations were helped by the proponents of the servant leadership perspective.

Yet, I'm equally sure that such notions were usually undone by the realities of most corporate life: power is to be taken and used, privilege has its prerogatives, and so on. In the corporate career "tournament," servant leadership was usually seen as the luxury of those who had already made it to the top.

Jesus understood well how the world worked, then as now. Rulers of all types lord it over their "subjects" he said. The weak are pushed aside and left behind. The visible hand of management too often becomes the iron hand of tyranny. Ask yourself, how many Americans would describe their bosses as servant leaders? Would you?

Yet, in today's passage from Mark, Jesus leads his own disciples towards servanthood. They aren't to live as the world lives. Instead, whoever among them aspires to greatness in the family of Christ must be the servant of everyone. The organization chart *is* to be turned upside down and left that way. And as the exemplar of a servant leader, Jesus will give his own life in service to his disciples and to all humankind, he will be "a ransom for many."

Servant?

The Greek word used in Mark 10:45 is *diakonēsai*, translated "serve." In a standard Greek/English NT dictionary, its meaning is "serve, wait on; care for, see after, provide for." *Diakonēō* (the root) is distinct from the Greek words *douleúō* (to serve as a slave), *therapeúō* (to serve willingly), *latreúō* (to serve for wages), and *leitourgēō* (to do public service). The word, *diakonēō* distinctly refers to a personal service.¹ Jesus demonstrated

¹From the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Kittel, abridged by G. Bromiley.

this service when he washed the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. They were aghast of course. Slaves were to wash feet, not the Lord!

The Servant People of God

An enduring biblical image of God's people is the *servant people of God*. In the Old Testament, God saves the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt so that they might serve him. (Exodus 8:1, 9:1, 10:3). Job is a servant of God (1:8, 42:8). Israel is the servant of God, whom God has saved (Isaiah 41:8, 48:20). This image of God's servant people is further developed in the New Testament and, like so much of Jesus' teachings and actions, is taken to levels that can almost make our heads spin!

Jesus' proclamation of the Good News is a proclamation that he is Lord and the Jews of his day would have heard this to be the claim of a master who is to be served. But . . . when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, the disciples fell to arguing about who would sit at Jesus' side. Jesus tells them that they don't really know what they are asking for . . . whoever wishes to be first among them must be the servant of them all! Perhaps most remarkably, Jesus said that he had come "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (see Matt 20:20-38, Mark 10:32-45, and Luke 22:24-27).

Just in case his disciples didn't get it (as they usually didn't!), Jesus drove home the importance of servanthood on the night of the last supper. Jesus gathered his disciples together to share the Passover supper, only to find that they were again arguing about which of them was the greatest. They would have been seated on couches set beside a low table, with their bodies toward the table and their feet dangling off the back of the couch. Because the roads and streets were so dusty, it was customary for the host to provide water for the washing of feet. But the actual washing was a very servile task to be done by a servant, slave, or perhaps submissive women or children, never by the men themselves. You can imagine all the disciples lying around waiting to see who would come in to wash their feet. Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He rose, removed his outer robe and began washing the feet of the disciples. Peter couldn't believe what he is seeing! When Jesus was finished (you can picture the disciples sitting open-mouthed!), he told that he had done this as an example to them, that they should do as he had done. He washed their feet and they ought to wash each other's feet. Jesus had lived out his teachings on servanthood right before their eyes, abolishing all notions of any pecking-order in the people of God.

But it is this personal service that James (the half-brother of Jesus) focuses on in the NT letter bearing his name. After Jesus' own costly and personal service, James writes, how could disciples possibly claim to have faith in Jesus and yet fail to serve those in need? Hungry people need food, not just encouragement. Freezing people need a coat, not merely a warm hug. As James pointedly notes, our faith will be demonstrated by what we do, far more so than by what we say. Echoing Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, James insists that professions of faith will be seen in actions, and if they are not, then the faith is absent. The true disciple is the one who hears and *does* (Matthew 7:24-29).

Faith and deeds

Many Christians have tried to drive a wedge between our faith and our deeds, as if admitting that God expects us to actually love God and love neighbor in all that we do somehow diminishes the truth that our salvation is by the grace of God and grace alone. Martin Luther, for example, actually wanted to rip the book of James out of the New Testament, calling it "a letter of straw." He read James to be claiming that we might somehow make ourselves acceptable to God rather than rely only on our faith in Jesus.

But Luther was wrong. The old hymn, "Trust and Obey," gets it right. There is no space between faith and deeds, between our trust in Jesus and our living. It is an "and" not an "or." As Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, those who have faith in Jesus Christ have been indwelt by God's Holy Spirit and will, necessarily, bear the fruit of God's Spirit (see Gal. 5).

As Jesus served us all, the "ransom for many," so Jesus' disciples serve others. It is simply what disciples do. The holy habit we need to form is listening to the call of our hearts to serve. We can try to tune it out, but the insistent call to serve will be there, urging us to live out the discipleship we claim.

Serving

Though the call to serve can seem a bit intimidating, just take a walk around St. Andrew on any Sunday. You'll see greeters serving . . . guides serving . . . singers

serving . . . ushers serving . . . teachers serving . . . nursery workers serving. All are personally serving the needs of others. Come to St. Andrew on 1000-hr workday. You'll see hundreds of disciples fanning out across the Metroplex – to serve. Scan the list of mission

trips taken by youth and adults each year – to serve. All the caring ministries of St. Andrew – there to serve.

It is as true for the habit of serving as it is for the other six holy habits. The question for us is not whether, but only how and when. These habits are no more than the expression of what it is to be a disciple. They aren't optional and they are not a laundry list to choose from. As James might put: Show me your faith and I'll show you my habits. Faith without these habits is not faith at all.

A Servant's Service

Jesus calls us to be "servants of all" (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn't it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the "big" project or "big" deal; true service doesn't discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God's approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service "delights" in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not! Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community. The New Testament witness reminds us time and again that we are called to be servants of God, servants called to build up the covenant community in which we live and to be a witness to those who live outside the covenant.

Though we are 2000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. Two weeks ago, we saw that when the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve. The Book of Joshua tells how the Hebrews conquered the Promised Land – or, more correctly, how God conquered it for them. At the end of the book, Joshua brings to God's people words of covenant renewal. "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness . . . if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (from Joshua 24:14-15).

When we join the Methodist Church we promise to "uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service." This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children's Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving as a Stephen's minister, or doing mission work, or building for Habitat for Humanity . . . there is no end to the opportunities. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, "Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity." We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, FEB 17 – FEB 23

How do these passages inform our understanding of serving, the seventh holy habit?

Monday, Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people's promise to serve God.

Tuesday, Malachi 3:13-18 Israel is reminded that the righteous serve God.

Wednesday, Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness

Thursday, Matthew 25:31-36 The parable of the sheep and the goats

Friday, John 13:1-20 Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.

Saturday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity and the use of our God-given gifts in the body of Christ.

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

This week: Islam, Part 1 Next week: Islam, Part 2

Two Special Saturday Workshops: next Saturday

Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching a workshop on “How to Study the Bible” and Laura

Zuber will be leading her popular workshop, “Higher Choices: Finding Purpose through Spiritual Gifts.” These Bible Academy workshops will be from 9-2 next Saturday, Feb 23.

For more information and to register go to www.thebibleacademy.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The biblical understanding of love for God and neighbor is built on concrete notions of love as sacrifice and action. Love is caring. Love is serving. Thus, the obvious, and oftentimes difficult, question is “How are we serving God and neighbor?” What did we do yesterday? Today? What will we do tomorrow? Where are our priorities? What are the barriers to our serving God with all our efforts and enthusiasm? How do we overcome these barriers? How do we find the joy in service?
2. When founding and guiding numerous congregations, Paul urged them to remember that the body of Christ has many members with many varied and wonderful gifts. Paul teaches that all of us are to serve the community in unity and harmony, but he also knew that we are all pretty different people. Some of us are equipped to teach, some are equipped to build budgets, some are leaders, and still others are equipped to be especially caring and supportive of those in crisis. How do we discover the individual gifts that God has given each of us? How do we go about finding the places in the church where we can best serve?
3. We live in a very achievement-oriented community and many of us come from professions filled with hierarchies of power and knowledge. In the church, there are no hierarchies of service – one way of serving the church is not spiritually superior to another. As Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” (1Cor 12:4-6) Do you find this hard to really accept? Is our seeming need for hierarchy a barrier to service? Or is it a lack of confidence? Or a lack of training? How do we overcome this?