

## *Growing . . . through Serving*

September 22, 2002

Background Study

This is the seventh week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” So far we’ve examined the invitation God extends to us all, the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and our relationships with others in the community of faith. We’ve looked at our growth through worship, through learning, and through loving. This week, we’ll turn to serving as a vital part of our lives as God’s people and as a means for our own growth.

*Key Scripture Passage - Mark 10:42-45, NRSV*

<sup>42</sup>So 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. <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.”

*The Servant People of God*

In the third week of this eight-week study, we noted that an important image of the church is that of 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).<sup>1</sup> 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, that whoever wishes to be first among them must be the slave of them all, and that, perhaps most remarkable, 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,

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<sup>1</sup> In your translation, these verses will read “worship,” not “serve.” The Hebrew word, *abad*, means to serve, minister, and worship. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, the Greek word *latreou* is used in these verses, a word commonly translated “serve” in the New Testament. The essence of biblical worship is service to God, which is manifested in our service to others.

removed his outer robe and began washing the feet of the disciples. Peter can't believe what he is seeing! When he is finished (you can picture the disciples sitting open-mouthed!), Jesus tells them that he did this as an example to them, that they should do as he has done. He washed their feet and they ought to wash each others 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. (for this story, see John 13:1-20)

### *True 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

### *A Servant’s Service*

Though we are 2000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. Last week, 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.”<sup>3</sup> We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, Richard. 1978. *The Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper. If you haven’t ever read Foster’s book, I highly recommend it. There are good reasons why it has been a best-seller for 25 years.

<sup>3</sup> Whitney, Donald. 1991. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. p. 121

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people's promise to serve God</p>	<p>Day 2 Malachi 3:13-18 Israel is reminded that the righteous serve God.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness</p>	<p>Day 4 John 13:1-20 Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity and the use of our God-given gifts in the body of Christ.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

