**Great Service**

October 19, 2024

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*“Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.”* Mark 10:44-45

In today’s gospel reading from Mark, we learn about what it takes to be great. Jesus says for the third time in a row, that his suffering, death, and resurrection is coming. Jesus frequently said things three times in a row to help his followers get it. The disciples don’t understand him the first two times, so it should come as no surprise that they don’t get it on the third telling as well.

Some theologians call James and John’s request of Jesus the most entitled request on record in the New Testament. Jesus loved these two brash young fellows and even had a special name for them, the “Sons of Thunder” but what were they thinking when they slid beside him and requested, “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us?” (Mark: 10:35)

Jesus kindly gives them the go-ahead to ask away and this is what they want, “Arrange it, so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory—one of us at your right, the other at your left.” (Mark 10:37) To be clear, they want to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven. They want to become like God. James and John think well, our names start with “J” and surely Jesus loves us the most. We must become the chosen ones.

Boy, do they get it wrong! Jesus sits down with all twelve disciples and lays it out straight. Jesus says, “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around. And when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who were held hostage.” (Mark 10:41-45)

I want to share this remarkable story my friend shared with me several years ago about their mother. This is a story about courage, about choosing to serve and protect rather than lift oneself up. This is a story about survival in the worst of times.

It was in the middle of World War II, as the Nazis were beginning to invade farther and farther West occupying capitals and small towns. Looting, destroying and rounding up Jewish folks and sending them off to concentration camps. A tight-knit Jewish community living in Rome for centuries was trying to figure out how to survive. Some had gotten out earlier taking boats to the United States, but many folks were still left in Rome. I don’t know what happened to everyone. The tale I heard was the story of one young woman, a girl rather, in her late teens who was hidden by the nuns in a convent in Rome. The young Jewish girl cut her hair, put on a robe like a novitiate and began to practice Christianity with the nuns as she went into hiding. Not a convert, but a Jew in hiding, the nuns used their cloistered life to shelter her throughout the Nazi occupation in Rome from September 11, 1943, until American forces liberated Rome on June 4, 1944.

This young woman stayed in the convent as her family was no longer alive until one day, an old friend, a Jewish boy from her childhood arrived at the convent in the months after Rome was liberated and swept her up in his arms and proposed to her. The nuns sent her out with blessings and love and she and the boy of her childhood married quickly in Rome, and she moved with him to Long Island where a community of Roman Jewish folks had moved to immediately before the war broke out.

This story of love and survival in the worst of times could be a novel, but it is also a testament to what it means to serve. The best way to follow Christ is to let go of our need to be the most important and show up as community to care for one another. This young Jewish woman needed shelter, or she would die. What the community of nuns did was choose to work together to protect her, to serve her, so that evil would not win.

Evil won on a grand scale during World War II. We cannot forget the atrocities of the Holocaust. We can also tell these stories of survival made possible by the courage of the ones who survived and the ones brave enough to protect. What would we have done? Would we have been brave?

Let’s return to the scripture lesson and ask ourselves what Jesus wants from us.

Jesus wants us to listen to his questions: “What is it I can do for you? And how can we serve one another? Our need for greatness and ego needs to go into the background as we strive to learn how to serve one another.

When I look around at West Parish, I see many of you who are these quiet servants of Christ who are getting the work done without taking on accolades or special awards. We have people like Joan Gregory who accompany Steve when she is in worship leading us with her voice and hope. I witness the love and dedication of Shirley Stolte and Lynn Parker who have helped teach our youth and children for years. While they are not doing it week in and week out, Shirley keeps our books for children up to date and seasonally appropriate. Lynn arranges flowers and the two of them work quietly behind the scenes as people who look after those in our church who are experiencing any physical challenges or hospitalizations or struggles.

Tonight our Saturday kids get to be helpers in the work that Shirley and Lynn do to help provide Halloween bags of joy to our church members who are shut-in or experiencing illness. We lift and celebrate the kids of West Parish Family School and are delighted to be part of Trunk or Treat coming up after worship on Sunday, October 27th and you are all invited to decorate your cars, provide candy, show up and hand out treats. And we need to show up in the ways we love our seniors and shut ins. This is one of the many ways I witness servant leadership here at West Parish. There so many ways that people lift and serve one another at this church, at their places of work and places where they go as retired folks serving on community associations, organizations and boards.

If you have people you would like to lift as un-sung servants of the church, let me know. I would love to share the stories of their love for specific people or the community in weeks to come.

Let us end this meditation with a song on service, reminded that we can answer the call “Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant, let me be as Christ to you” with our lives and in the ways we love. We are called to love one another right now.