

Not to Be Served, but to Serve

Nicole Farley

Winnetka Presbyterian Church

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Mark 10:35-45

The Request of James and John

³⁵James 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.” ³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹They 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; ⁴⁰but 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.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 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.”

Mighty bold of James and John, isn't it? Even if they still didn't *exactly* get who Jesus was: “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you”? Since they addressed him as “Teacher,” it's safe to say they had some idea that he was special. They weren't entirely dense, although it's sometimes questionable by Mark's telling of the stories. Let's say for a moment we don't know who Jesus is and nor do they. Their question of him is obnoxious in the very least. If an impertinent child said, “I want you to do whatever I ask of you,” how many might reply with an “Oh, reeeally?” An adult's same request might warrant an “Are you serious?”

But Jesus doesn't reply like this at all. Last week, in the text that comes just before this one, we heard, in Jesus' interaction with the rich man, “he looked at him, loved him” and then replied. The same could be said for Jesus with James and John. He says, “What is it you want me to do for you?” Just like that. Even though he has just told them three different times that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” “What would you like?” he says. Without animosity or impatience or resentment but with love. And so easily it is that Jesus lives out the words we hear at the end of this text: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” “Not to be served but to serve.”

Backing up, he precedes “not to be served but to serve” with words which are familiar to us but which would have been shockingly non-conformist at the time. “...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” As

Christians we understand that our aim should be one with Jesus' aim – not to be served but to serve. We have heard this throughout our whole lives, whether we grew up Christian or not. We have watched others model this for us in our families, in our friends, in our leaders, in giving people across the globe. So, in our context, this first part, “not to be served,” could be considered an obsolete admonition. We get it.

It makes sense. One could argue that people are not a commodity...unless you consider the professional athlete or perhaps the barista with a bad attitude. It's reasonable to wish for good customer service, yet, on our less Christ-like days, when someone's crummy service towards us feels like a personal offense, we may jump to complain that this particular company representative did a poor job and made our experience unpleasant...long before we stop to think perhaps she might be at her second job that day or he might be going through a tough personal time or she might have had her own crummy customer service experience somewhere else earlier in the day. Let this “not to be served,” “*not* to be served” we hear from Jesus be a gentle reminder in our ear, in our heart, when we come across a person, another human being like ourselves, someone's child or parent or friend, another child of God who may be working an ill-suited job because it was the only one around and it happens to involve serving people hour upon hour, including you.

We may intellectually “get” that people aren't there to serve us but our outward actions cannot always be separated so cleanly from our inner conversations and our inner feelings. Perhaps like the barista with a bad attitude, when we've been through something unpleasant, it's not easy to keep ourselves from passing that unpleasant feeling along to someone else. Coming from that place, that negative incident, it's hard to want to follow the second part of Jesus' words: “but to serve.” On a good day, “serving” doesn't conflict with our overall outlook. Once that rough day has passed, our optimism, our kind-heartedness returns. And we know how we can serve; we understand there are a variety of ways of being which can all be understood as serving, ministering. Delivering flowers to the homebound, walking in the CROP Walk, simply sitting with another person going through a difficult time. I could spend the whole worship service listing opportunities and still be nowhere near having named them all.

But what do we do when the rough day passes and we don't feel better? Or when that rough day becomes a string of rough days? What do we do when serving takes more energy than we have? In days and weeks when we feel not only empty but maybe even turned inside out? What do I do when my husband is overseas for two weeks for business, when my son is trying to pull together fundraising for his Eagle Scout project, when I'm a field trip chaperone, when my job is rewarding yet also demanding, when a close friend already in crisis gets laid off, and, oh yeah, when I'm supposed to fit grieving in there somewhere? If I don't come away feeling empty, it certainly leaves me feeling

squashed flat. My circumstances are not yours and yet I am sure yours can leave you feeling just as deflated, just as worn out. Certainly in no position to serve, at least not without a smidge of despair and possibly resentment.

The Gospel of Matthew tells today's story with Jesus saying "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." This statement can be dangerous if we read it as saying that putting ourselves last will put us ahead in the end. We are called to not be selfish; that is *not* the same as neglecting ourselves. You may have heard that you can't give to others if you have nothing to give. If we keep draining our wells, and don't take time, take steps to refill them, if we don't allow the spring chances to restore the supply, eventually our wells will be dry. We're never beyond help – the spring is always there. Our energy, our spirit to serve, is a renewable resource.

So what can we do to renew our spirits when we feel steamrolled? Being in church, it seems worthwhile to remind you of the models Jesus put forth for us. The Bible tells us Jesus prayed, even going off by himself to do so. We know, too, he shared meals – not a quick bite but a long, drawn-out affair. The Gospel of John tells us he went to the festivals that were part of the Jewish tradition: he was part of a community, he celebrated. Chances are he was what we would classify today as an extrovert, renewed by being with others. And, if he wasn't an extrovert but an introvert who needs to be alone to recharge, that time away by himself was even more important. Last, but certainly not least, he studied the Torah.

The things he did were important examples for us. Important, too, were the words he spoke. Remember, Jesus said "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." In case we didn't pick up on his modeling of *ways* to be renewed, Jesus tells us outright that there is *time* for us to be renewed. Hint, hint. Go. Be renewed. Pray. Eat to taste, to savor, to be nourished in body and soul. Read your Bible – really read, not to say you've gotten through it but for comprehension. Give yourself space to let questions form and insights break. And be with one another, really present with another person. Take the Sabbath.

Now that I've given you a spiritual to-do list, do you feel even more stressed out? If so, I get that. So let's begin right here and now. One of the simplest prayers you can do is what's called a breath prayer. You can select a sentence of Scripture or form your own short prayer to use. For us here today, I'd like to use part of one of my favorite Psalms, Psalm 46:10. "Be still, and know that I am God." Close your eyes and, as you slowly breathe in, hear in your head the first part: "Be still." As you slowly breathe out, "and know that I am God." "Be still." Breathe in. "And know that I am God." Breathe out. And repeat. So that you might not be anxious and wonder when we might conclude, I will tell you now that I am going to be quiet for two minutes so that you might have a chance to truly be still. "Be still, and know that I am God."

“Be still, and know that I am God.” I hope you feel how two minutes in prayer can calm you, center you, replenish you. God provides for us many means to refill our wells but don’t feel limited to the Biblical to find refreshment. We are all different. Listen to what deeply nourishes you. With the release of the “Where the Wild Things Are” movie this weekend, review after review has been glowing, and with good right. One reviewer said, “At times in this movie I felt like it was making me regress to being a little kid, remembering the simple joy of throwing things, breaking things, building things, making up stories.”¹

Think back to your own childhood. Was there something you just loved, something in which you could get lost for hours? If you’ve stopped doing it, what about picking it back up again? Soccer, skipping rope, swinging from the monkey bars, reading Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys novels. I think maybe when Jesus said in the Scripture we heard two weeks ago, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it,” that the Sabbath could be tied in here. Children “get” Sabbath. Their bodies demand it. When my son was small, we could always tell when he was tired by the purplish smudges under his eyes. At some point we stop listening to our bodies’ needs for rest.

Reclaim or find something that brings you joy. It doesn’t need to have a cost or come with accessories. The important thing is that it feeds your soul. And when you know what that something is, do it reverently. Just like we sometimes eat so quickly or distractedly and, in so doing, miss the flavors, textures, and satisfaction, if we try to nourish our souls without being present, we do not benefit. The intended pleasure is diminished.

Take time to find out what source or sources refill your well. Then, just as you brush your teeth each day to keep them healthy, do this recharging practice mindfully each day to keep your soul healthy. When your well is being supplied steadily, when even those stretches of rough days seem manageable, when a bad customer service experience doesn’t color your day, most importantly, when you feel compelled by gratitude towards God, go out and serve. After all, we have all been called not to be served but to serve.

¹ <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/42677> [Note: This review contains language that is not PG-rated.]