

## ***The Servant Church***

Mark 10:35-45

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Yesterday we witnessed something I've never seen anywhere else in my ministry—an outpouring of generosity from island merchants and individuals outside the church to support the work of our church. That's what happens year after year, and I suppose it's related to the wonderful sense of shared community we enjoy and the historic role of this church as a community center. But what is the rationale for asking the community to support our work? How do we have the nerve to ask for all that stuff?

The only valid reason for such support is if we as a church serve the community. Do we deserve the support of Catholics, Jews, unchurched, and non-Christians simply because we are a church? Or because we are historic? Or because we are right? I don't think so. Do we deserve it because we are poor? Not even that. The only reason we have any excuse for asking outsiders for help is if we really are a servant church.

All four gospels include scenes of Jesus teaching his followers that they must be servants—that whoever wants to be great must act like the lowliest, that in the kingdom of God the last will be first, that Jesus himself did not come to be ministered to, but to minister. Think about the story we just heard from Mark 10 (35-45). It comes pretty late in Jesus' ministry, just before the entry to Jerusalem. Jesus has predicted three times that he will be crucified. But here come two of his closest friends, including his best friend John, the one Jesus loved, and they want to ask Jesus for a favor. "We want you to do whatever we ask."

"Yeah, right. I'm not giving you a blank check. What do you want?"

"We want to be on your left and right when you are glorified." They are thinking of being second and third in command when Jesus takes over, but Jesus is thinking about the cross—and who will be on his left and right then.

"You don't know what you are asking. Do you think you are able to go through what I'm going to go through?"

"Yes, sir!" they say. "Can do!"

If I were Jesus, I'd have said, "No you can't." Instead Jesus says, "Yeah, you're about to go through it with me like it or not, but it's not my role to decide who reigns with me in the kingdom after that."

When the other friends of Jesus get wind of this, they are angry—not because they are philosophically opposed to seeking power, but because they want power for themselves. Jesus calls a huddle. "Boys," he says, "you know the way the Romans act. When they have a ruler he lords it over everybody and throws his weight around. He wants to be worshiped and called a great benefactor, but he acts like a tyrant. That's not the way it's supposed to be with you. In my empire, as opposed to the Roman one, leaders are servants. If you want to be great, be a servant. If you want to be first, be a slave to everyone. I'm your leader, right? Look at me: I didn't come to be a boss and have people serve me. I came to serve and to give my life in order to set people free."

In John 13, Jesus acts out the same lesson at the last supper he has with his friends before he goes to his death. He strips down to his underwear like a slave and wraps a long towel around his waist. Then he bends down in front of every one of his friends with a bowl of water and washes their dirty feet. Then he spells it out again. Look at me: I'm your boss, right? I'm your teacher, right. If I get down and do the work of a slave, that's what I expect you to do. That's what love is like. That's what my kingdom

is about—not striving for power and who gets to sit next to me at the table. It's about serving one another and demonstrating love in practical ways.

Luke 22 (24-27) tells a similar story. There, at the supper, a dispute breaks out about which of the friends is the greatest. Jesus reminds them that greatness is seen in the one who serves, not the one who claims honors for himself. "Ask yourself," he says. "'Who is considered the greatest: the one who sits at the table or the one who waits on him? But look at me. Look at me! I am among you as one who serves.'"

Most of us understand the idea of servanthood on an individual level. We know that we should do things to help other people, that we shouldn't think that we are above doing the dirty work, that it's not Christlike to throw our political weight around and be bossy in church. Even if we sometimes struggle with the call to downward mobility, we try to follow Jesus' command to be servants. We think that means two things: (1) serving one another, and (2) serving the church as an institution.

But what about the church? Is the church a servant in relation to the world? Sometimes we think of the church as the beachhead of the kingdom of God in this world, so the church shares the glory of Christ himself. Sometimes we act as if the church is the community of those who do things the right way—holding ourselves in the same kind of self-regard as the Roman Empire did, seeing ourselves as benefactors who deserve to be acknowledged and submitted to. It is possible for the church to be full of people who see themselves as servants, but for the church to be far from a servant church. What I mean is that the church can be a club of believers who serve one another and who serve the church—fixing the coffee, taking care of the building, raising money, teaching classes for ourselves—without the church itself being a servant to the wider community.

Doesn't Jesus' command for us to be servants apply to the church? When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he said "As the Father sent me into the world, so I am sending you." How did the Father send Jesus? He humbled him and made him take the form of a servant, and being found in human form Jesus humbled himself further still to die on a Roman cross as a criminal. Jesus says "I am among you as one who serves." Is the church among the unbelieving community as one who serves? Is Harbor Church among the people of Block Island as one who serves?

If you are a Baptist, you probably understand that our roots are in the idea that you can't use force to make anyone a Christian. We began because we didn't believe that the King or those people in Boston have the authority to tell you what to believe about God. So we reject the idea of the church demanding that the society become Christian. That's what was behind the terrible tragedy in Norway on Thursday, it turns out. A right-wing fundamentalist Christian brother of ours got the idea in his head that the ruling party was the enemy, so he first blew up a government building and then we went to a youth camp sponsored by that party—on an island you can only reach by boat, like this place—and shot 80 teenagers and camp leaders dead. That was his way of fighting the loss of Christian values in his country and what he saw as the bad influence of Muslims on his once-Christian nation. We ought to be horrified by that, and doubly horrified because it was done by a brother of ours, and triply horrified because we can see how the rage among right-wing Christians in our own country at the ruling party could lead to such a tragedy here. Following Jesus is never about assuming that we have the right to demand a Christian society. Whatever influence we have in society we have to earn by our own faithfulness to Jesus and to the life of service he called us to.

Do you remember what the church was known for in the first and second centuries? They were known chiefly for three things: (1) their witness to Jesus as Lord, (2) the creation of a new society that included all ethnic groups, men and women, rich and poor as equals, and (3) their program of giving to the poor, especially to widows. They became famous as a servant group. In a city like Rome, the church fed thousands of widows. It was that faithfulness to the Jesus way of life that won them converts when

the church was illegal. But once Christianity became the official religion of the empire, that began to change. Then people began to think about using politics to make nations Christian. Then the church became every bit as hierarchical as the Roman government had been. Service was one of the programs of the church rather than its identity. It was no longer the servant church but the church triumphant, the ruling church. We still haven't gotten over that, although our Anabaptist and Baptist forebears tried their best to break with that. We still slip into this idea of ourselves as privileged in the culture, as if we have the right to tell people to believe like us.

Few of us at Harbor Church would qualify as being Restorationists who want to institute a Christian version of *sharia* law like the Puritans enjoyed in Boston. We have a humbler view of the church than that, perhaps a view of the church chastened by our own decline. But that doesn't mean that we are a servant church; it may mean that we have given up or have become discouraged in our efforts to change the society.

The key question is whether we think of the things we do as a church to serve our community as a way of helping the church (by getting good P.R., attracting members, etc.) or as a way of helping the community because we love them and are commanded to serve them. You know you are not a servant church when people ask "Why do we spend money on people who will never come to church? Why spend money on youth when they have no use for church at all?" Our service is not a form of bribery. We don't do what we do in order to get people to come to church. The goal of our ministry is not to build up our church—is it?

Here's the deal. Most people out there just don't want to come to church, because they think that church is for church people, not for them. It's not even on their radar screen. I can guarantee that most of the folks eating blueberry pancakes at Ernie's right now never even considered the possibility of walking up the hill to worship with us this morning. For years polls have told us that in America interest in spirituality is way up, interest in Jesus is way up, but interest in church is way down. That's because Jesus is seen as someone who champions the cause of the poor, who heals the sick, who cares about outcasts, who serves people—and that's not the way they see the church. They see the church as looking out for itself—its own budget, its own buildings, its own power—rather than looking out for people, and the priest sex abuse scandal is only the most blatant example of that.

One of my favorite writers and speakers on how to do church is a guy from South Carolina named Reggie McNeill. He says that most pastors and churches are asking the wrong questions today. The wrong question, he says, is "How do we grow this church?" which means "How do we get them to come to us?" The right question is "How do we transform our community?" How do we put the gospel into action on the streets? Reggie also says that a wrong question is "How do we turn members into ministers?" which almost always means "How do we get them to do church work?" The right question is "How do we turn members into missionaries?" How do we deploy them for community transformation?

[*The Present Future*, Jossey-Bass, 2003]

Most churches, including this one, are in perpetual survival mode. All our attention is focused on staying afloat. We are driven by fear, even if we have reserves, even if we have faithful members. As long as we are focused on the survival of the church as an institution we will be unable to think about what Jesus wants us to be as a servant church. We will think of resources placed into community transformation as resources diverted from the church, rather than resources enabling us to *be* the church. Ironically, the truth is that our only hope for survival in this culture is to stop worrying about survival and to focus on the needs of people outside the church.

You know, I'm proud of Harbor Church because it gives so much to the community—especially in allowing groups to use our building. But I think that we have a ways to go in seeing Harbor Church as a humble servant rather than as an island institution worthy of respect and loyalty. The servant church has to start by radically identifying with Jesus. We have to decide to be Jesus people in our own faith, in

our worship, in our learning about him, and then to become like him in the way we live in the world. That means becoming like him as the foot-washing slave and as the convict on the cross rather than becoming like him in his glory. Someday the glory, but first we are servants.

We are trying to ask the right questions: How can we serve those with substance abuse problems—since we know that is the number one problem on the island? How can we serve the gang at Kittens or Nicks who have no interest in church? Should we have group meetings there instead of here? How can we serve our neighbors with mental health problems? How can we serve internationals who are far from home? How can we serve the children of our island and the staff of our school? How can we serve the poor on the island?

Those are questions many of us are already asking, and I think Jesus will give us the answers through his Spirit and our own open eyes. But we look to serve the community not so that they will come to church, but so that we can *be* the church, the embodiment of Jesus on this island. May we be among them as one who serves. Amen.