

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Memorial Lutheran Church, Toledo  
October 21, 2018

Text: Mark 10:35-45  
Theme: Called to Service

Some of you may be familiar with the following illustration of heaven and hell. At first glance both appear to be the same. In both there is a huge, beautiful banquet hall filled with the wonderful fragrance of tasty stew. In both, people are seated at long tables upon which are placed these large pots of stew. Each person has been given a very long golden spoon with which to eat but which needs to be held at the very end. That's the end of the similarities. In hell the people tried desperately to feed themselves. But because the spoon is too long, they are starving. They succeed only in spilling the hot stew on their thin bodies. In heaven there is the sound of laughter and conversation. They too have long, golden spoons which can be grasped only at the end. But with those spoons they have learned to gently, carefully feed one another.

Both the story and the Gospel lesson open our eyes to see that a willingness to humbly, joyfully serve one another is at the heart of the Christian faith. But both stories also illustrate how such service is at odds with human nature which shapes how the real world so often operates and which persistently asks, "What's in it for me." When it comes to household chores, how often don't parents hear their children respond, "What will you give me if I do this?" That seems to be the question which is continued through national and international politics. As we approach Election Day, how often don't we lament that the primary concern of some elected officials appears to be themselves rather than the public they are called to serve? Sometimes we view the church in the same manner. A pastor once reported to me that a couple preparing for their wedding day began by simply stating, "Pastor, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." We like to be on top. We like to call the shots. We like to be served.

Has it always been that way? In the Gospel lesson James and John come to Jesus with the request, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." For the moment, Jesus goes along with them. "What is it you want me to do for you?" These disciples are not bashful about their request. They reply, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left." Surely it seemed to them a logical request. From the very beginning, they had followed Jesus and, presumably in their own minds, saw themselves as loyal, faithful, and brave. Later we learn that the other disciples are ticked off when they learn of the request of James and John. Don't you suspect that they only wished they had thought of making this request first? And, can't we understand that request. Don't we also feel that our faithfulness to the Lord should be rewarded with good health, with success, with prosperity?

Jesus now asks James and John if they want to follow up on the implications of their request for greatness as he comments, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" James and John boldly responded, "We can handle that!" What they didn't understand was that as Jesus was lifted up on the throne of the cross, they will run away. Two thieves have the "place of honor" and are crucified on Jesus' right and left. We also might want to echo those disciples, "we can do that!" But aren't we also among those who can abuse our power, who can be crowd-pleasers, self-servers or so dominate others that they feel they have no value or importance? When our eyes and hearts are set on ourselves, we find ourselves refusing to drink the cup that Jesus drank or be baptized with his baptism.

Jesus' response clarifies for the disciples and for us what it means to be followers of Jesus. The call to discipleship is the call to give up the pursuit of self-seeking, domination and control. It is an invitation to pursue the love of God in authentic service to others. Jesus declares, "You know that among the nations, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." That for which our Lord calls, he both models and makes possible. Think of all the stories you know which reflect Jesus' serving another. But his service will not be complete until he "...gave his life as a ransom for all." The Second Lesson reminds us of the nature of his service, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..."(Hebrews 5:7-8)

For James and John, that "ransom" worked. Following Jesus' resurrection, they became servants, drank Jesus' cup of suffering and participated in Jesus' baptism of suffering. Knowing this one who has served us, we are free to see ourselves as servants of one another for Christ's sake. As we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done"-we are praying, "Free us, O Lord, for lives of service." We don't have to hunt for opportunities. They are present in our homes, in our workplaces, and in this congregation as we repeatedly ask, "What is God calling us to be and to do?"

One such arena where we can serve is that of local, national and global hunger. Last Wednesday was World Food Day and today is Bread for the World Sunday. Pastor Amy Reuman is Director for Advocacy for the ELCA. In a reflection on this text she writes, "In Jesus kingdom, greatness is achieved by stopping to attend to the wounds of those around you and by addressing the hunger and hurts of our world. And when faith moves into action alongside those who are hungry and hurting, then we already are by Jesus' side. To be with him in his glory, we open ourselves to his path of service, justice, and compassion." Echoing that thought the late Roman Catholic priest wrote, "In prayer we meet Christ and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them we meet the suffering Christ." By the grace of God, have we not learned something about the joy of serving?

As a word of encouragement for holy service, hear the words of the hymn we will sing:

Lord, whose love in humble service bore the weight of human need;  
Who upon the cross, forsaken, worked your mercy's perfect deed;  
We, your servants, bring the worship not of voice alone, but heart;  
Consecrating to your purpose every gift which you impart.

Called by worship to your service, forth in your dear name we go,  
To the child, the youth, the aged, love in living deeds to show;  
Hope and health, good will and comfort, counsel, aid, and peace we give,  
That your servants, Lord, in freedom, may your mercy know and live. (ELW 712)