

Sermon Preached by Jennifer Rose

October 18, 2015

“The Servant Leader”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you ever just want to smack someone upside the head?

Okay.... not really. I'm not advocating violence from the pulpit.

But seriously, Jesus has got to be just about fed up with the disciples. They just Do. Not. Get. It. This is the third time that he has tried to explain to them what is about to happen to him, that he is to be killed, and here they are AGAIN... just not getting it. And they have the nerve to ask him for a little bit of power.

Jesus has **got** to be frustrated. Seriously, James and John... where have you been this whole time? Jesus keeps talking about suffering and death, and they just can't seem to get that through their heads. Of all the things to ask about, of all the things to worry about concerning heaven, they're worried about where they're going to sit. And according to Matthew's version of the story, they don't even have the guts to ask the question themselves. Matthew tells us that they sent Mom out to do it and hid behind her apron strings. *“She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”* Nothing like going right to the top. We want to sit in the front row right next to you Lord – on your right and on your left. How can you say No to our mom?

This outraged the other ten disciples. They were angry, indignant. Why? Was it because they – the ten – were committed to humility and servanthood and James and John had really damaged their unity with this bold request? No. They were upset they hadn't thought of it first. Now James and John had “called it.” You remember doing that when you were kids, right? These other ten were not pure in their motives either. Just a few days earlier all twelve of them had argued among themselves about who was the greatest.

Just imagine... Imagine wanting to be important, great, to have the best seat everywhere you go, to be served rather than to have to serve others. Imagine wanting to be first. Not so hard to imagine, is it? How many kids rush to be last in line? And let me guess – all the people who drive so quickly and recklessly weaving in and out of traffic – so they can be first in line at the next red light – they're trying to get home or to the office as quickly as possible so they can get busy serving. They can't wait to serve. It's all about serving, thinking of others, and selflessness, right?

No, it really is all about me. For you it's all about you. We don't mind serving as long as we get to serve self, as long as there is something in it for us. Know what we are? Chickens. There's something you and I have in common with chickens. They and we have to deal with something called The Pecking Order. In chicken pens, for example, there is no peace until the chickens figure out who is the greatest and who is

the least. The top chicken eats first and can peck on any chicken it wants. The middle chickens are pecked on by those above and can peck on those below. The bottom chicken is pecked on by everybody. Why? Nobody knows. They just do it. And so do we.

And we know why we do it. Because by nature we can't and don't look beyond self. Selfishness, not selflessness, is the way things are. And the Pecking Order prevails. We see it everywhere. In families, office, job site, high school, elementary school, even preschool.

Let's be honest about this. Call it what you want – selfishness, self-preservation, looking out for #1 – it's sin. God's Word makes very clear that we are sinful from birth, sinful even from conception. We came into this world dedicated not to service, but to self-service. Our natural desire is not to serve but to be served. Even when we manage to achieve some sort of service, our thinking can be tainted by, "What's in this for me? What can I get out of this? What reward will I get?" It's a me-centered, self-centered, self-serving world. It's not called a upod, a upad, a uphone. It's ipod, ipad, iphone.

This selfishness and pride break up marriages and cause children to be neglected. They lead to grudges within families and between friends. Selfishness and pride cause work to suffer, and finds addiction.

And yet, Jesus is surprisingly gentle with James and John. He doesn't yell at them, blast them for their selfishness, or even call them Satan as he once did to Peter. *"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"* In other words, "Are you able to endure the suffering and death that I am about to endure for the sins of the world?" Still not understanding James and John reply, "We can." On one level, their response was pathetic, but it turned out to be prophetic. About a decade later, James was martyred by King Herod while John lived another 60-plus years. But toward the end of his life, John was exiled for clinging to the true faith. In this way they both drank of the cup of suffering and death.

Jesus brings an end to the rash of selfishness and phony indignation running rampant through the 12. *"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."* Of course, that's the way things are. That's the world for you. Pecking orders all over the place. Then he says four words that change everything: *"Not so with you."* Not so with you, James/john/Peter/Andrew/rest of the 12. Not so with you, people of First Lutheran Church. Not so with you in your home/office/neighborhood/church/family. He's abolishing the pecking order. The kingdom of God is like a barnyard where there is no pecking order and the greatest chicken is the humblest chicken. Nobody's struttin' and nobody's peckin' and every chicken is looking out for every other chicken rather than just serving itself.

That's what Jesus means by *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."* And before the disciples can offer objections and excuses, Jesus buffers this astounding paradox with his own example: *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* Jesus is all about service – washing feet/drying tears/giving hope/forgiving sins/suffering and dying – all without thought for himself.

In fact, he did exactly what he said he would do. He'd just gotten done telling his disciples very clearly, for the 3rd time what would soon happen in Jerusalem. He would be betrayed, condemned, mocked, flogged, crucified, and raised to life. He died for you. He died for all. Talk about selfless living!

I haven't flown much during my lifetime, but I do know this. Most flights have seats toward the front of the plane called 1st class. The seats toward the back are called Coach. You know what they really are – 2nd class. You're treated like 2nd class. The pampering and serving happens up front, in 1st class. The two compartments are separated by a curtain, sort of like the curtain in the Temple separating the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the Temple. And if you're flying coach, which most of us do most of the time, you're stuck in the court of the Gentiles, 2nd class. We'd all like to ride 1st class, but if you don't have a ticket, you don't get in.

When Jesus left heaven to come to earth, imagine the angels saying, "You'll be traveling 1st class, of course." But Jesus says, "No, I think I'll go Coach – manger, stable, carpenter, no money, the Son of Man who has no place to lay his head. "I'll go Coach. Jesus, at your service."

How do we respond to such service, such humility, such love? The only appropriate response to reply likewise – Jesus, I am at your service. True greatness is not measured by greatness, authority, power, status, influence or where you are in the pecking order. True greatness is not measured by how many people are beneath you, but by how many people are above you. True greatness is measured by service and we want to serve as Jesus serves us – humbly, willingly, joyfully, wholeheartedly.

Think about this idea of service in this way:

- I serve, not just once in a while, but with my whole life. *"In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies (your whole entire life) as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship"* (Romans 12:1) Not just 1 hour on Saturday or Sunday, but 168 hours each week.
- I serve, Not just when I feel like it, but even when I don't feel like it
- I serve, Not just when people are watching me/noticing what I do, but when nobody's watching
- I serve, Not for applause or recognition, but out of love for my selfless, serving Savior who flies Coach and who puts himself under everyone else so as to lift them higher
- I serve, Rather than head for the top or seek to be first in line, let's head for the bottom and seek to be last and least as Jesus did.

St Francis of Assisi (1200 AD) is one of the most well-known figures in Christian church history. He said, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." In other words, show the love of God with your life/deeds. He's also known for this prayer...you can find it on page 87 in the front of the hymnal. It's under the title, "A prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi". I invite you to turn to page 87 and pray this prayer with me.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is discord, union;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Serving isn't about me or you. It's about Jesus and his service/love/sacrifice for us, which is ongoing. As we gaze upon him, fix our eyes on him, may we be led to joyful, faithful service – not "I have to serve" or "I suppose I should serve" but "I want to serve." I serve because Jesus serves. I give because Jesus gives. I live because he lives for me and in me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.