

Mark 9:30-37
September 20, 2009 at Union Grove Baptist Church
South Plains

The Greatness of A Servant

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).”

That’s a line that gets an “Amen” in most churches. Presbyterians might not say “Amen” out loud, but we’re thinking it. We all want to think of ourselves as Christ’s servants. In fact the phrase “servant leadership” caught on a few years ago thanks to the work of a man named Robert Greenleaf. A servant leader puts the needs of others ahead of his own desires, according to Greenleaf. For example, a servant leader would not get rich while his business went bankrupt. A servant leader would not take huge bonuses while investors and stockholders lost their life savings. A servant leader would not spend taxpayer money on personal excesses while public debt increased. We can all agree with those negatives.

But, I wonder if it’s easier to know what a servant should not do than it is to know how a servant should act and live; or how you and I as Christian servants are supposed to live our lives. The problem is that being a servant, literally being called a “servant” is not popular. Most of us don’t want our children to grow up to be servants. Being a servant is hard work, and tricky work.

I’m uncomfortable around people who insist on waiting on me. The other day Debby and I went to a restaurant for lunch after going on an 8 mile hike with friends. The server brought me a tall glass of sweet tea and then left to give us a few minutes to decide on our order. I finished the tea and looked for the server to get a refill. He was busy; but as I turned around I saw pitchers of tea and water not six feet away from our table. So, I got up and poured tea for myself and the rest of the table. I was just sitting down when our server returned. I’m not sure whether I embarrassed him more or offended him more by what I had done in pouring that tea. It’s hard to serve, to help without getting in the way, to be useful without taking over somebody’s job or imposing one’s own agenda. And, it’s also hard to be a humble servant without becoming an obsequious doormat that no one likes or respects. How can we be the kind of Christian servants that Jesus wants? That’s the challenge I hear in this verse.

In Jesus’ time a servant was someone who had few if any rights. The first followers of Jesus were not people with prestige and influence. In the larger world, they did not have the rights and privileges of Roman citizens. Within Palestine, some were laborers, at least one was a hated tax collector and another was later described as a thief. They were just half a step above servants; and I’ll bet they all wanted a better life, not a move down the ladder of success to becoming a servant.

As they listened to Jesus talk about the kingdom of God, he offered some hope. Maybe the kingdom would not make them rich, they didn't want that necessarily. But, if Jesus was the prophet of the coming kingdom; if Jesus himself was the king, then his closest friends would surely get some benefit.

Consider where we are in Mark's gospel story, chapter nine. In chapter eight, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is the anointed one of God, the promised savior that Israel has been looking for. He's not just a miracle worker or an eloquent preacher. Jesus is the Messiah. At the beginning of Mark chapter 9, Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured into shining white and standing with Israel's greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah. Finally, they think things are beginning to fall into place for Jesus' mission. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees couldn't get the best of Jesus – he's the Messiah. So, as they trail behind their Master on the road to Capernaum, a question arises among the twelve. If Jesus is king, then who comes after Jesus in the pecking order of the kingdom?

It's a very human concern. What's my place? What's my title going to be when God reigns over the whole world? After all, I'm the pastor of South Plains where the church is 190 years old. Maybe I'll be in charge of Keswick. Sorry Pastor Edwards. You may be better looking, but I'm older. I ought to be first. That's

the sort of argument I imagine was taking place among the disciples.

I know that none of us would really come into church like Mohammed Ali and announce, "I am the greatest at South Plains or at Union Grove!" That was fine for the boxing ring, not for the church. But, even if we don't use those words, we might angle to get a little more recognition for ourselves. We might lobby the preacher to make sure our programs in the church get a good hearing or a larger piece of the budget. Or, maybe we just want to be sure that we are not always the person left with most of the clean up after a wonderful church potluck. Arguing about who is the greatest is a little crass. We would be happy to be recognized just as a pillar of the church. Maybe not the greatest, just one of the most important. That's the way pride works.

Jesus says we should be happy to be the servant of the church. Or, as the Pope occasionally likes to say, "the servant of servants." Let me say that I do not believe a servant in the church of Jesus Christ should be subservient, a groveling disrag of a person, completely passive and servile. We have an example of what servanthood should look like in the life of Jesus himself. When he is arrested and dragged before Pilate, he takes the role of the suffering servant. He does not fight his captors. He does not argue with Pilate. But, neither does Jesus give up one single ounce of his dignity. To the eyes of faith, and I believe in the eyes of Pilate, there is no question who is really in charge. The Roman

soldiers do not take his life. Jesus gives his life for our sakes and for the sake of his tormentors. He is the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy. And, he is not at all servile.

This is at the heart of Christian faith. When the Master realizes what his followers were arguing about, he seizes the opportunity to teach. The gospel says, "He sat down...." In that culture, you knew the teacher had something important to say when he sat down. I suspect he sensed immediately that his disciples would have a hard time understanding that proverb about becoming the servant of all. The concept was against everything they wanted as ambitious human beings. So he illustrated his proverb by taking a child in his arms. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Jesus is identifying himself with a child, a helpless, dependent person with very little value in the ancient world of his time. To welcome someone with little value is the same as welcoming Jesus, and to welcome Jesus is to welcome God. Just as he did by holding up a servant as the model of godliness, Jesus turns our values upside down by taking this child in his arms. Who welcomes children in our society? Near the bottom of the pay scale in our country are the people who take care of our children. You will not get rich working in a daycare center. You may get some benefits by working as a classroom aide in the public schools, but you won't get

much. Teachers, however, can make a decent living in the classroom, but their salaries are nothing like other professionals. If you are in the business of welcoming children, you are a servant near the bottom of the totem pole.

That's one reason childcare is so important in the life of churches. Taking care of the little ones lives out the example of Christian service we see in the life of Jesus. Moreover, taking care of the youngest, most vulnerable is a responsibility entrusted to the followers of Jesus Christ. When my two year granddaughter starts walking toward the street, I can't order her to stop and turn around. I become the servant who runs to protect her. If she needs food, somebody has to prepare the food and see that it gets into her mouth. Childcare is typical of what it means to be the servant of all.

Of course, it's the first question in the minds of young parents when they are church shopping: does this church have clean, safe, loving childcare? If a church community loves children and knows how to care for children, the people of that church know something about being a servant.

Servanthood does not stop with the little ones, however. The servant community is always looking for ways to contribute to the welfare of their neighbors. There are two indicators of successful service in the church that I would highlight today. First, a servant church is building community, creating relationships,

making friends and toughening the ties that hold us together. This happens because the best motivation for everything a servant of Christ does is love for others. When people care about each other, they also care for each other. And, they are able to forgive each other. Even the best servants make mistakes. Even the best Christians will sometimes be unloving, unkind or thoughtless. A community built of servants will be able to forgive one another, and thereby strengthen the bonds of togetherness.

The second indication of successful service in the church is that we will see individuals growing beyond their capabilities and beyond their circumstances. Let me tell you about Henry. Henry came from a prominent family, but he never held a job to my knowledge. Today we would call him developmentally slow. He attended the Riverside Presbyterian Church in Florida every Sunday in the same clean blue suit, black tie and white shirt. After worship, he would find one of the ministers and say, "I thought everything went very smoothly." And, every Monday he would show up again. Years before I met him, the minister of the church had taken an interest in Henry and had asked him to straighten the Hymnbooks and the inserts in the pew racks. That was Henry's Monday job, and he did it faithfully. When Henry died unexpectedly, his sister sent the church a note of thanks for giving her brother a meaningful place in the church. Long ago, that congregation started serving Henry's need, and Henry in turn served the church. He transcended his limitations to become a contributing

member of that community. Real servanthood works those kinds of miracles in everyone of us. We become part of the beloved community and we grow beyond ourselves.

Servants of the living God "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

May you be last of all and servant of all, yielding good fruit and prospering in all that you do.