

“WALKING IN LOVE, PART 1: SERVICE”

Mark 10:35-45

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

We hear this story, and we wonder what James and John can have been thinking. They've been hanging out with Jesus for a while now. They've watched him heal people, feed people, forgive people, touch people considered 'untouchable.' They've witnessed his compassion. They've seen him making time for children. They've heard him talk about the last and the least, and about sacrifice. Maybe they have some misunderstandings about the nature of the kingdom, the reign, of God that Jesus is always talking about. But surely even a little bit of time with Jesus is enough to know that this ambition for powerful and prestigious roles at his side just doesn't *fit*.

It's hard to understand why these two haven't taken Jesus' example more to heart, why they aren't trying to be like him and imitate the kinds of things they've observed him doing. Why aren't they coordinating a feeding program, or trying to organize the chaos of all the people coming to be healed, or helping the lepers get a support group started, or mentoring kids, or collecting funds for the needy? There is so much to do, and yet here they are thinking about their own advancement and comfort instead of following what they should have learned from Jesus.

Fortunately, we know better and we understand that Jesus has called us to follow him in a life of service. We know that being Christian isn't about access to special influence or privilege or success or material advantages. We don't mind those things, of course, but we try to take Jesus' teaching to heart. And so we try hard to serve God by serving others. There are so many ways to do this, and we know a lot of them, because we've done a lot of them. You name it, I bet there's somebody among us who's done it: Volunteering at Ministry with Community, or Loaves and Fishes, or Planned Parenthood or the library or an animal shelter; buying Angel Tree gifts or food to donate; registering voters or going to a protest; tutoring or coaching a kids' team or leading a scout troop; helping out at church with ushering or teaching or spring clean-up or the art festival; going on a mission trip; walking in the CROP Walk or raising money for another good cause; cleaning up litter; writing letters about poverty or gun violence or environmental justice; helping ex-offenders or refugees or single moms... and the list could go on and on.

Some of us have had jobs that are partly or entirely devoted to service. Some of us have dedicated a lot of time and energy to caring for loved ones, young or old or ill or troubled. Some of us quietly provide support and encouragement to folks we know who are struggling. Some of us give generously to good work we believe in, making sure that others can continue to serve and that important needs are met.

Some of us are always looking for new ways to serve. We know a lot about service, and individually and collectively, we're pretty great at it. It feels good to serve - to be *able* to serve.

It feels important. It gives us a sense of agency and purpose and control. It's good for us. We can feel really proud of the ways we have served, and we do.

Hmmm.

It seems pretty easy to slip into being competitive, self-important, ambitious, and proud even when we are thinking about or engaged in acts of service. Without even realizing it – it's so subtle – we find ourselves feeling ever-so-slightly superior, because of the ways we are able to serve... even when we are wanting to be good followers of Jesus.

This gives me a clue about something in the scripture that I wondered about: after Jesus tells James and John that seats on the right and left of his throne are not on offer, and the other disciples begin to be angry at the hutzpah of these two brothers, Jesus calls all of them together for a little talk. It's not just John and James he takes aside; *it's all of them*. Apparently they *all* need to be reminded about the values of Jesus' realm – including the disciples who, like us, are a bit offended by James and John's wish for a superior status. It was easy for them, and it's easy for us, to point at James and John for seeking to elevate themselves in a way that's contrary to Jesus way of servanthood. But Jesus knows that the same temptation is there for all his disciples. Even when we think we are being really good at serving. Maybe especially then; because when something good becomes a vehicle for pride and self-serving, it can be harder to see.

It seems to me that we don't reflect a whole lot on the nature of service and on what it means in our lives. Usually we just want to dive in – which makes a certain kind of sense, because we know how many needs there are. But deeper reflection can help us walk the path of service with greater intention, and perhaps more love and joy. That's what I'd like us to do today.

Now, I hope you know that I don't want to discourage service. And it's entirely natural and not necessarily wrong to feel good about it or proud of it. But we need to be aware of the temptation to be more about the greatness than about the serving. We do sometimes treat "service" more as a thing to put on our resume (or in our church brochure) than as an expression of love for another person. And that might not be exactly Jesus' spirit of service. Which perhaps we can think a little more about.

The Bible seems to suggest that true service involves a mindset (or maybe a heart-set) as much as actions.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul writes:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....
(Philippians 2:4-7a)

The famous etiquette expert Emily Post is supposed to have said that good manners are not about whether you know what fork to use but about what you can do to help another person feel at ease. It seems to me that you can say something similar about service. It's not about

checking off a list of good deeds, but about whether I can attend to the needs, or hurts, or hopes of someone else.

That means centering the needs of our sisters and brothers, rather than our service. Sometimes we assume everyone wants or needs what we want or need. Sometimes we are sure we know what's best for someone else. Sometime we get excited about what we want to do, what we used to do, what would be easiest or most fun to do... and forget that the ways we want to serve aren't necessarily the ways that someone else needs to be helped. What we are eager to give may not be what someone else wants to receive.

Several years ago a number of us learned a great deal about relationships from reading *The Five Love Languages*. The thesis of this popular book is that individuals express and receive love in different ways. What communicates love to one person may not do anything for someone else. Words of love and appreciation may make you feel special and cared for, but to your friend, who feels love best when it's expressed in the form of practical help, words may be all but meaningless. The idea is that it's important to learn how to express love to your partner, child, or friend not in ways that *you want* to express it, but in the ways the other person needs to receive it. It's a simple but profound shift in thinking. I'm not overstating when I say that it can transform relationships.

Something similar is at the heart of the way of service in which Jesus leads us. "Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the mind of Christ be in you," Paul writes. It's not bad to respect your own interests and needs. But it's important not to get them confused with what someone else needs. And sometimes we need to get ourselves out of the way, so that we can truly and wholeheartedly serve.

I want to read a couple of other scriptures that illuminate some facets of our call to serve:

This one is from the fourth chapter of Matthew:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

And this one is from John's gospel, a couple of short sections of the 13th chapter:

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

"After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'" (John 13:3-5, 12-15)

In that first scene, Jesus is in a very public ministry setting – doing some guest speaker spots at synagogues in various towns, and healing lots of people who are coming to him. I can well imagine that it was both exhausting and rewarding to be serving in that way, touching so many people’s lives.

In the second one, we see him in a private setting, with some of those he was closest to. Here, too, Jesus is serving but this feels a little different: he’s caring for his disciples; he’s trying to help them understand something; his act of service is part of the relationship he has with them, and reinforces the bond among them.

Seeing Jesus in both of those settings helps to clarify the nature of service as both personal and engaged in a bigger picture. And it highlights some other difficulties we can get into as we embrace his call to serve.

Sometimes Christians throw themselves whole-heartedly into a life of service, and dedicate countless hours to volunteering in the community, activism, church leadership, helping others, and doing good things in the world... while their family relationships suffer and friendships wither for lack of attention. Probably every one of us has witnessed this sometime or other. Clergy are notorious for it, but I believe it happens with a lot of people in helping professions. Is it that more public serving gets us more pats on the back? (There’s that wanting to be great thing again!) Is it just easy to forget that reading to a child, making breakfast for your spouse, or picking up some groceries for a sick friend is also serving?

Of course, it’s equally possible to go the other way – tell ourselves “charity begins at home,” and focus our energy solely on our own inner circle. Taking care of loved ones can be a rewarding kind of serving. It can also become a ready rationale for distancing ourselves from the needs of people outside that circle. That’s problematic in so many ways, not just because help and resources don’t get shared, but because in separating ourselves we miss out on the solidarity we could help build... which is not good for either those within our circles *or* for the larger communities we are part of.

What it comes down to, I think is that when Jesus calls us to serve, he isn’t inviting us to build a resume, or choose from a list of service projects. He does ask us to enter into his mindset – his *heartset* – for service. He’s inviting us to understand that service is not so much stuff we do as it is *how we are*. Jesus doesn’t want us to separate our private and our public selves, or to be someone other than ourselves. He doesn’t expect us to have all the answers or solve all the problems. He does warn us to be attentive to the attitudes and assumptions we bring to our serving, no matter who we are with. Jesus invites us to see our neighbor, our friend, our loved one – really *see* them, really try to understand what *they* need. He reminds us that sometimes we need to get ourselves out of the way, so we can make a genuine connection, so we can understand a bigger picture. He reminds us that we are not without needs ourselves, and that we have things to learn. When Jesus invites us to service, he is inviting us to open-heartedness. He is inviting us to be in solidarity. He is inviting us to walk in love. Amen.