

What's So Great about Serving?

Matthew 20:17-28 (NIV)

¹⁷ Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ¹⁸ "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. 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." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

We are now about halfway through Lent and quickly approaching Mount Calvary and Jesus' suffering and death once again. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the final time. On the way, he pulls his Twelve Disciples aside and reminds them and teaches them yet again that he, the Son of Man, "will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (verses 18-19) This time when Jesus teaches this, it elicits a reaction from the brothers James and John. They go with their mother to ask Jesus to have the brothers sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom. Jesus responds by saying that "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." (verse 23)

When the other ten disciples hear about this, they were indignant with James and John. They were mad, thought that this was underhanded, sneaky, lacking in honor. They probably were mostly angry that they hadn't thought to do this themselves. As they were probably starting to verbally take James and John to task for their request – especially as they were aided in doing so by their mother – Jesus called them together and taught them. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." (verses 25-27) This teaching probably rocked their world a bit. Everyone knows that it's your accomplishments that will elevate you above other people so that you can be above them. You don't get ahead in life by serving others. We know that we have reached greatness when people serve us.

Is the disciples' outlook on greatness your outlook on greatness, that greatness is achieved when people serve you? Would you have been like James or John and employed your mother in helping convince Jesus that you deserve a great seat in this kingdom, that you deserve to be served? That may very well be a specific temptation for you, a way that you fall into the trap of vanity, thinking that you are so great that you deserve to be served.

But maybe you are a service oriented kind of person. Maybe you already go out of your way all the time for other people. Maybe a good portion of what you do each and every day is service to others. Maybe you are a caretaker. Many of us are caretakers without necessarily taking the title officially. You may be tending to the needs of your kids, your grandkids, your spouse, or your parents or maybe a combination of those people. For some of you, serving others consumes your life: the trips to and from the hospital and the pharmacy, the meal prep, the physical assistance, giving medication every hour on the hour, keeping that medication list straight, being on call that at any time no matter what you are doing you go and help. You may have spent so much time giving care that you are overwhelmed, exhausted, irritable, anxious, maybe even depressed.

If you're being honest, you already know that there is seemingly little about caretaking that is great. Yes, occasionally you'll receive gratitude from the person you are helping, but many times you won't. In fact, they will just demand more things from you and get upset with you when you are not immediately filling those demands. Maybe you will receive praise from friends and neighbors and other family members, but you have a hard time appreciating it because they are not offering to help and may even tell you that you need to get out of that caregiving situation.

With all that going on, maybe your sinful nature responded to Jesus' words about serving others like my sinful nature did: "To become great I have to serve others, be their slaves? Um, no thank you. I really don't want greatness that much. You people who want that honor and prestige, who want to be great, you know what, you can serve me. I will happily let you do things for me so that I don't have to do them. Relieve me from all the caregiving, and you can have all the glory that goes along with it."

Serving people is hard. Being a caregiver brings suffering to our lives as we try to do it all and we find out just how inadequate we are. The more we try to take care of people, the more we find that we are not capable of constantly serving people in that capacity. And this burdens us with guilt, guilt that we are not enough when it comes to serving people, even when we have in sound mind agreed to doing it, even when we want to do it for that person.

This is why when James, John, and their mother asked to be great in God's kingdom, Jesus responded by saying, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" (verse 22) If they really want to be the greatest, they are going to have to serve and spend their whole lives doing so. This would bring suffering to them. The brothers were confident that they could drink Jesus' cup of suffering that comes from service, and Jesus knew that they would. By serving others in his name, these brothers would be imprisoned. They would be flogged. James would be the first of the Twelve to be martyred when King Herod killed him by the sword. Although history would tell us that John was the only apostle to die a natural death, he would experience the loneliness of isolation as he was exiled to an island late in life, separated from his brothers and sisters in Christ. These brothers would indeed suffer for serving others for Christ's kingdom.

Caregivers, those of you who spend a majority of your time serving, God knows how tired and worn out and burdened you are. He knows that you carry guilt on your shoulders because you can't do it all and you are getting burnt out. As you are probably thinking about the list of things you still need to do today to take care of that person that God has placed in your life to serve, Jesus tells us today that he is here to take care of you. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (verse 28)

Jesus did not tell his disciples about his impending suffering and death and resurrection so that they would do things to serve him, that they would take pity on him and try to make his last few days on earth enjoyable, surrounded by people who cared for him. No, Jesus was telling them how he was serving them. He was going to drink that cup of suffering - the whole cup - for them, for many, for you and for me. It was not just going to be what he underwent in Jerusalem, though. He had been using his whole life in service to us. He spent every day setting out to live the perfection that he was called to live for us, to take care of keeping all those commands of God that we try to keep but just can't do perfectly. For every time that we simply did not have enough time or energy to care for those people that we said that we would care for, Jesus served us by giving his life as a ransom for many. Jesus did not serve us in this way so that he would become great, but he served us in this way so that we would not be slaves to our consciences that tell us that we don't serve enough.

Caregivers, if you are carrying that guilt on your shoulders right now of not serving joyfully, of not having enough time or energy to serve others, then I want you to see today the Son of Man who came and served you. He served you by giving his life as a ransom for you, to free you from that guilt. The things that you have not been enough to do have been done by Christ. This is how he served us.

Jesus continues to serve us each and every day by giving us the strength to get up for one more day. He serves us by giving us that patience not to lose it on the person that we are caring for, but to calmly serve them. And if you are sitting here today thinking that you're not a caregiver, well, then if you look at the announcements in the bulletin, we have lots of things coming up that you can do to serve your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. So many served to make our 25th anniversary worship so special. And now we look ahead to Easter, needing people to serve others by donating items for the Easter breakfast, having people help cook that day, to help set up the church, prepare things, clean up, and more. All of these services we do because we have already been served by Christ.

This is why we serve. We don't serve to become great. We serve because Christ served us. Because he served us, we have been ransomed from being slaves to our guilt that we aren't enough to do it all. Because Christ has served us, he has made us great in his kingdom. As we go about serving others in this world, we look at how he continually serves us and this gives us the joy and motivation to serve others. Amen.