

The Church's Service

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Date: 24 November 2019

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[0 : 00] Now, you probably know that Lake Wobegon is an invented town in the American Midwest. It's been created by a storyteller called Garrison Keillor, who has a monthly radio program, a podcast for those of you under 30, called The Prairie Home Companion.

And every story, every week when he finishes the Lake Wobegon story, it finishes with the same words. He says this, well, that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.

And it's a lovely, gentle poke at competitive parenting. And what some people now call the Lake Wobegon effect, where we all have to be above average, and all our children have to be above average, which is no small part of the anxiety of Generation Y.

I shouldn't tell you this, but some years ago at St John's, we had a rash of parents who thought that their children ought to be accelerated in Sunday school. Because they said our children are spiritually gifted.

I'm glad you laughed at that. Well, our passage today at First Sight has a great example of competitive parenting. Right after Jesus predicts his death for the third time in verses 17 to 19, Mrs. Zebedee, the mother of James and John, comes up to Jesus.

[1 : 38] And in verse 21, she says to him, And in verse 24, you can hear the howls of anger and protest from the other ten disciples.

They are furious that they didn't get in first. Now, James and John are part of the inner core of the three key disciples with Peter.

They were the ones who went up on the Mount of Transfiguration to see Jesus in his glory. And to be fair, Jesus had said back in chapter 19 and verse 28 that they would sit on thrones judging Israel.

And since then and throughout this section, the 12 have been obsessing about the pecking order. And the wonderful thing about this is that none of them think they're doing anything wrong.

You know, this ambition and this competitiveness they think is a good thing. And Mrs. Zebedee is presented as fully religious. She believes Jesus is the Messiah.

[2 : 46] She's following him to Jerusalem. She makes this request kneeling on the ground. And Jesus' answer in verse 22 shows that it's James and John who put their mum up to this.

Because in his answer, he directs his answer not to you singular, but to you plural. You plural. You do not know what you are asking, James and John, and you are the ten. Now, this is the last passage in our section, chapter 16 to 20.

It has been a discipleship training intensive. And just like you and me, the disciples are stuck on lesson number one. And that is to even enter the kingdom, we have to humble ourselves and become like children.

That the Christian life is one of self-denial, not self-fulfillment. That if you're a believer, you're seeking downward mobility, not upward status. That our life is one of serving, not self-seeking. And I want to look at this passage under two headings because it gathers up lots of these themes. The first heading is the passage is so revealing about us. And it's so reversing of the way we put things together.

[4 : 05] So just two headings. The first one, it's so revealing about us. And you can see that Jesus is still in training mode from the first verse.

So in verse 17, in the shadow of Jerusalem where he's going to be executed, he takes his disciples aside privately. And now he gives them the clearest possible prediction of his death.

And verse 18, for the first time, he includes his disciples. You see, see, we are going up to Jerusalem. And if you've been with us for a couple of months, you know this is the third prediction

since chapter 16.

And you might remember that each prediction is fuller and clearer than the last one. This is the first time Jesus speaks about being delivered over by the Jewish authorities to the Gentile authorities. What a shame for the Messiah of Israel. And specifically, for the first time, he will be crucified. And the disciples, they just refuse to believe it.

[5 : 13] They just can't take it in. Their minds are set on greatness and status and their own needs. And this is so revealing of who we are. We ask the question, why is it that Jesus does this?

The three times he makes such a clear death prediction, adding each time. And I think part of the answer has to do with our spiritual filters, our filters.

Now, in themselves, filters are not a bad thing. I mean, we use them all the time, don't we?

Otherwise, we'd be overwhelmed by information. And, of course, today we have cognitive filters. So we only listen to the news that tells us to believe what we want to believe.

But spiritual filters are a form of selective blindness. We believe only what Jesus says what we want him to say when it fits with what we think.

So we filter out what Jesus says about suffering or about sacrifice. There's just no room for that kind of negativity. We love the promises of glory and eternal life and of new bodies.

[6 : 21] And I don't know if you've noticed or not, but this happens every time Jesus makes a death prediction. The first time was in chapter 6 where he clearly speaks about his death. And Peter takes him aside and gives him a telling off.

He says, that's ridiculous, Jesus. And Jesus turns to the disciples, you remember, and he says, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself. Take up his cross and follow me. That's his answer.

And then the second time in chapter 17, Jesus makes his death prediction. Just a couple of verses later, what's their question? Who among us is the greatest? Fantastic, isn't it?

Jesus takes a child and he says, whoever will humble himself like this child will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And here Jesus has just predicted with the greatest clarity possible. And his disciples, you know, mocked and scourged and crucified.

And his disciples, they just completely ignore what he said. They refuse to believe that this Jesus would willingly choose to suffer. And their response is to compete for the best seats in the kingdom.

[7 : 29] Who gets the highest place? The place of honour and significance. It's just so, it's so exposing of the way our spiritual filters work. We have these spiritual filters.

They're like bars on the window, blocking out rays of truth. And we have so many ways of filtering what Jesus says, so we remain unchanged and unchallenged.

And if we hold on to those filters, gradually our spiritual vision becomes distorted. And in the end, we'll filter out Jesus himself. One sign that you are filtering what Jesus is saying to you is that you're disappointed with Jesus.

You feel like he hasn't come through for you. And the next mark is there's a cooling between you and him where you hold back fully trusting him until he gives you exactly what you want.

And the longer we hold on to our filters, the more resistant we become to change. That is why every Sunday when we hear the word of God preached, we pray.

[8 : 36] It's not just an empty gesture. We pray for God to break through the filters of our hearts and to bring change to us. Because there's nothing the preacher can do to change your heart. It must come directly from God.

To humble ourselves and to serve each other, we've got to know each other. God expects us to watch over each other lovingly, to support each other in times of vulnerability, to serve each other willingly.

In a church I worked in in Australia, there was an older woman. And she refused to speak to anyone in the church. She would come.

She wouldn't talk to people before. She wouldn't talk to people afterwards. And I asked her about it. She was not shy. She was not introverted. And she told me that, I said, how are you loving people? And she said, when I take communion, I pray for the person who kneels on my left and kneels on my right. But I refuse to speak to them. But the surprising thing is that when she came to be in need, she seemed perfectly able to articulate exactly what she wanted and to everyone around her.

[9 : 51] So I think these three death predictions show that Jesus patiently and perfectly keeps repeating the basic essential lesson of the Christian faith.

Life comes through death. The crown comes through the cross. Glory comes through suffering. And suffering and serving are the way of the kingdom of heaven.

And James and John want to be on the left hand and the right hand of Jesus. And it's such an irony that the next time that's used in the gospel is when Jesus is lifted up on a cross. And there's someone on his left hand and someone on his right hand.

It's so revealing that they're asking for thrones. It's so calculating. It's wonderful. You see, at the root of our spiritual filters is the sin of presumption.

You can see this in Jesus' answer. First answer in verse 22, he says, You do not know what you're asking. I love this. You know, half the time we're praying, we haven't got a clue what we're asking. [11:01] We ought to introduce this in our liturgy. You know, instead of, Lord, hear our prayer, we ought to say, Lord, we haven't got a clue what we're asking. In the shadow of the cross and of the resurrection, the disciples are asking for glory, not suffering.

And they're treating Jesus like a kind of a spiritual consultant to their own fulfillment. It is presumption. And this marks so much of our hearts, doesn't it? We want Jesus on our terms. My will be done, not yours be done. Belonging to Jesus, we love the good things he gives us and promises us, but not him. We take, you know, we say we love you as the pearl of great price, but really what it is, we want people to look at us and say, You look so great with that pearl. But he won't leave us there and he won't leave them there. He wants his disciples to see the great reversal. That their concern for status and refusal to even think about the suffering of Jesus Christ, so understandable and so human and so revealing, is the reverse of the way things are in the kingdom of heaven.

For the way of Jesus is the way of serving. To be great is to be small. To be first is to be last. To receive is to give. So I want to move secondly to this very big issue of the fact of Jesus reversing. [12:29] At the heart of this passage is the most radical reversal imaginable. It's not ours. It's God's.

And it's this, that God stoops to serve us by suffering, by sacrifice and by substituting for us. And his serving is both the pattern as well as the power of our serving. It's the shape as well as the source of our serving.

And it makes this reversal possible in our lives. So here it is. Let's look down at these verses, verses 25 to 28. Here is the heart of God, brothers and sisters. Jesus called to them and said, verse 25, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.

And their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.

[13:32] Whoever would be first among you must be your slave. Even as, just in the same way as, the son of man came not to be served but to serve. And to give his life a ransom for many.

So Jesus wonderfully summarizes what is true in our hearts and the way we put life together in our city, in our families, all over the world. And the way we do it is by having power over others.

We try subtly and not so subtly to have other people serve my needs. Jesus says, The great ones, the rulers and leaders in our society and every society, they operate by.

And he uses two words, lording it over and exercising authority over. And at the front of each word is a little Greek prefix. And it is the word down. The way to get up is to push others down.

The way to impose your authority is to lean on those under you. The way to rise up in terms of status and power and influence is to stuff others down.

[14:39] And it's just as true on the playground as it is in politics, in finance, as it is in fashion. We've been watching Ken Burns' documentary series on the Vietnam War.

That is not easy watching. And the suffering and devastation and violence seems to get worse in every episode, particularly on the part of the Vietnamese people.

But the fundamental calamity that runs through the entire tragedy is not so much war, as dreadful as that is. It's not so much the politics of left and right.

It's not even the corruption or even colonialism. It is this reality of pushing myself up by pushing others down.

The French did it via colonialism. The North Vietnamese did it through purges and political cleansing. The South Vietnam leaders did it through corruption and cruel leadership.

[15:41] And the United States leadership did it through a warfare based on lies. And Jesus says in verse 26, It shall not be so among you.

You. You who follow me, you are to live in a different way. Instead of pulling yourselves up by pushing others down, you choose to push yourself down to give others a hand up. But, he says, Whoever would be great among you must be servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave. This word serving, it's a very down to earth word. It means washing dishes. It means doing laundry. It's getting hands dirty, taking out the trash for others, not for yourself. And the word slave is the lowest rung on the ladder. There's no freedom of choice. There's no concern for your own vast dignity. There's no award for doing well. You do not even belong to yourself. You belong to a master. [16:42] And your only ambition is to please the master and those who he gives you to serve. Now, I wonder if you think we have a serving mindset here at St. John's.

How do we do on this? I think at St. John's, we're pretty good. We're pretty good at this on the day. What I mean by that is, if we're all together, and there are chairs and tables to be stacked, and washing to be done, we're pretty good.

But when it comes to be committed to doing something more than once, I don't think we're very good. Last week, I heard a wonderful story that comes out of my own seminary in Australia. The cleaner retired, and they decided to save money and ask students and staff to volunteer to clean the buildings. And all went well, except for one thing, they could not get anyone to volunteer to clean the toilets.

And one day, a male student came in early to do some work using the bathroom, and it was clear that there was someone in a cubicle on his hands and knees cleaning the toilets.

[17:43] And he called out his thanks, and he was greatly surprised to hear the voice of the principal call back, no problem. It's a great story. Where does this come from? Well, it comes from the supreme example of Jesus himself.

And I know verse 28 is very familiar to us. If you've been a Christian for a couple of years, but we forget the shock in this verse. Just take the first phrase of verse 28.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. Okay. If you're still with me, put your hand in Matthew 20 and turn back to Daniel 7 for a moment, please.

The Son of Man is the, well, he's a divine human figure chosen by God to whom God is going to give all authority and dominion to.

And there's a reason in Daniel 7. I'm on page 745. Daniel 7. This is Daniel's vision in verse 13. I saw in the night visions and behold, with the cloud of heaven, there came one like a son of man.

[18:55] And he came to the ancient of days. That's the name for God in this vision and was presented before him. And to him, to the son of man was given dominion and glory and a kingdom.

Why? So that all nations, sorry, all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away. His kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed. But if you look back at Matthew 20, Jesus says the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

That's the opposite of what Daniel 7 says. See how striking that is? And this is the heart, the paradox at the heart of the Christian faith.

The Son of Man, the Son of God in glory, humbles himself to the point of death to serve us. To establish a kingdom where greatness is measured by humility, by first, firstness is measured by serving.

[20:04] Notice, please, that Jesus says the Son of Man came. This was a choice he made before he came into the world. Cannot, cannot understand Jesus apart from this. And his determination to serve was the reason why he became incarnate.

And I know we're just about to move into the Christmas season. It's good for us to remind ourselves that he was eternally greater and more first than we could imagine. And he gave it away to serve us in self-forgetting love.

Doesn't do it for his own advantage or for his pushing anyone down or for his own status or reputation. He does it willingly. We find out later he does it joyfully, without any reluctance. He came to serve us.

And his serving involves suffering. And I think true serving always does. Now I think that's why he mentions the cup back in verses 22 to 23 with John.

It's the Old Testament picture of punishment and suffering. And he picks it up again in Gethsemane, dominates his prayers in Gethsemane. And then at the Lord's Supper on the same

night, he explains what that is and we'll come to that next year.

[21 : 13] So Jesus embraces suffering for the best purpose of all, for our salvation. And he calls on us to embrace suffering for the purpose of serving.

He doesn't want us to be masochists. Nowhere in the Bible are we to suffer for the sake of suffering. We suffer for good purpose. We suffer because of our identification with him.

Jesus' whole life was one of suffering. And he calls us into his way of service, into a life of serving. And the obvious question for us is this.

If it's so hard to humble ourselves, you know, if the natural way is for me to get you to serve me, and if I have all these spiritual filters and I'm too insecure to put myself lower, how can I possibly become your slave or your servant?

I mean, let's be realistic about this. And I think the answer to that is that it is impossible. You know, to be honest, by myself, my serving is grudging and often half-hearted.

[22 : 20] And I so naturally think of what others owe me, not the other way around. And we're easily offended, aren't we? And I think this is where the second half of verse 28 is so important to us.

Yes, the Son of Man came to serve, and not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. If all I had was Jesus' example, it would be lofty and inspiring to aim at.

But the power to do what he did is only in the second half. If the second half of this verse is true, if he really did give his life as a ransom for us, then his serving is not just a great demonstration, but has the power of transformation in it.

Jesus' great act of serving is to die in our place as our substitute to ransom, to free us from the prison of our own self-serving. Buys us out of that slavery into the freedom of his servers.

Do you know, this week, as I've been thinking about Vietnam, I receive a prayer letter from Resources Leadership International. It's a group I support.

[23 : 35] And it's an update of the story of Heather and Daniel Owens. They're an American couple with their two boys who are returning to Hanoi in North Vietnam. They're going back to the Hanoi Bible College to teach the Bible to training pastors with their two sons to an incredibly over-polluted and overcrowded city.

There is no Tim Hortons. There are no Safeways. All the veggies and fruit will have to be washed by bottled water. Their clothes will be sweaty all day. And you know what their letter?

Their letter is just full of thanksgiving and praise and the privilege of serving God there, that they've been allowed to go back in to this context to serve the gospel. And below this, on the website, is a photograph of the last graduating class of the Vietnam Bible College.

Twenty-three, I counted them, young pastors. So, as I'm watching the devastation of the war in Vietnam, here is God reversing the way authority works as believers go and are willing to serve. This is the essence of discipleship in the kingdom of heaven. It's serving him by serving each other and serving his world. And I've thought about this.

[24 : 54] I think the challenge for us is not to think of one, you know, one act of service or one thing that you'll be committed to doing as a serving thing over the next year.

I think the challenge to us is to ask God for a change of heart, from wanting others to serve you, to a heart set free to serve others, and a willingness even to suffer to serve others.

It changes everything. That's why we gather on Sundays. We gather to serve each other. If you come for your own upbuilding, that's less than half the reason you ought to be here.

It's more than half the reason to build up others. And it doesn't matter if there are others better at it than you or if others have more gifts or whether you're too burdened and busy. This is what it means to follow Jesus Christ to the cross.

And I think that's why he includes these last couple of verses, which we didn't read. And I just want to read them to you. So verse 29. As they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him.

[26 : 04] And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David.

And the crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent. And they cried out all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David. And stopping, Jesus called them and said, what do you want me to do for you?

Same question, almost the same question he asks Mrs. Zebedee. And they said to him, Lord, let our eyes be opened. And Jesus, in pity, that's the big word there, compassion, touched their eyes,

and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

What's so wonderful about this is this closes the chapters. They do not come to Jesus based on their presumption. They beg for mercy.

They've got nothing to offer Jesus. They know they've got nothing to contribute. There's no pretense for them. They know they're completely dependent on his mercy, and they joyfully persist in calling out for mercy, as we've done a number of times in our service today.

[27 : 14] It's exactly what we should do. And Jesus, this is his deepest emotion, compassion. He touches their eyes, and immediately they see clearly, and the first thing they do is they follow him.

And did you notice as I read those words, there are two followings. The first one is in verse 29, where the crowd follows him. They're not really committed. They're just spectators. And the last word of the chapter refers to these two men.

They've got their sight restored. Their filters removed. They're not just passengers or spectators. They follow the one who's opened their eyes, who's begun to change their hearts, the one who's full of power and pity, who has served them and is now going to serve them by going to the cross. And as they climb the 3,000-foot hill from Jericho in the basin up to Jerusalem, they follow him to the place where he will be crucified to begin a life of serving him.

Amen.