

DEVOTED SERVANTS

Series: Mission Possible

Matthew 20:20-28

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I have a childhood memory of our family visiting an older couple at their vacation home. We had gone for lunch. At the appointed time, we were seated at a beautifully set table. Once in our seats, the host rang a bell and a uniformed woman began to serve us. The memory has stayed with me because I was not accustomed to being waited on by a domestic servant and it made me very uncomfortable. When the meal was over, I got up to help clear the dishes. In my home my brothers and I were responsible for setting and clearing the table and helping with dishes. I wanted to help that day. My parents stopped me, one with a hand on my knee and the other with a look that said don't move. I stayed put, but I was not happy.

My issue was not that I was just dying to set or clear a table, or even that someone else was doing it. I mean, I did not have the same feeling in restaurants, wanting to help serve the food or to do the dishes. In that sense, this was no different. The uniformed woman was paid to fix and serve meals, and to clean up, although I am sure her wages were painfully low. No, my uneasy feeling that day was that there was a clear distinction of status. This woman was not welcome to sit and have lunch with us, even after the meal was served. She was not invited to speak or to enter the conversation in any way, and she was spoken to only if orders were to be given. We belonged in the dining room. She belonged in the kitchen. After all, she was only the servant.

Even as a child I found that distinction of status upsetting and I am no less bothered by it decades later. I completely buy into the Christian understanding that every person is a child of God and the American creed that all people are created equal. When status distinctions are made, regardless of whether it is because of race or ethnicity or gender or economics or titles or things as subtle as height or looks, it is distressing. All of this is to say that for me, maybe for you, too, but for me at least, the word servant is problematic. It denotes a status distinction that makes me uncomfortable. It is a stumbling block for me.

And yet, Jesus tells us to be servants, and we call ourselves servants in the very first part of our mission statement. Have we chosen an inappropriate or outdated word, or is there a different way to understand this?

To see if we are using a proper word, I turned to Webster, you know, the dictionary, the original google for words. The very first definition of servant is, "a person employed by another, especially to perform household duties." Yep. That was my lunch

experience. The second definition is, “a slave.” That strikes at my uneasiness. Just the idea of slavery sets off bells for me. Maybe I am on to something. But Webster goes on. The third definition is, “a person employed by the government.” Hmmm. This is what is behind the term public servant which should not have a negative connotation at all. These are people who have willingly chosen to serve the people by providing police protection, fire protection, bringing the mail, making sure social security checks are sent, examining food for safety, teaching our children, plowing our roads and on it goes. That puts service and servanthood in a different, positive light. Still, it does not touch the heart of our mission statement. Webster goes on with a fourth definition of servant. He says that a servant is “a person ardently devoted to another, or to a cause, creed, etc.”

Ardently devoted to another! That speaks directly to the first part of our mission statement – devoted servants. Devoted: dedicated, consecrated, loyal, faithful. This describes our relationship to God. The Lord is not just a person of interest in our lives, an acquaintance with whom we occasionally touch base. No, we are completely committed, heart, soul, mind, and strength to our God, devoted, and so we stand ready to serve in any way that God needs us. Devoted servants say, “Whatever it takes, whatever you need, whatever you want, we stand ready to serve. We are your servants, Lord.”

That feels right. And the status part is not an issue because there is rightfully a distinction of status between God and us. We are not equals with God. Indeed, a lot of the trouble we get in comes when we try to be – when we think we know better or when we consider our opinions equally as valid as God’s. Devoted servants. I get it. Just based on Webster, that is a good way to begin our mission statement. We are devoted servants of God.

Jesus agrees, but takes it even further. We are not to be just servants of God, but also servants of each other. We see this in our Gospel lesson today. In the lesson, the disciples are jockeying for position. Technically, the mother of James and John, perhaps the first known “helicopter parent,” was trying to get a promotion for her sons. She asked Jesus to let them sit on his right and left hand, in other words, to be the top two in his coming kingly administration. The implication is that the boys, grown men, knew that mom was speaking on their behalves and were OK with that. Matthew tells us that when the other ten heard about it, they were pretty ticked off. Clearly a power struggle was developing.

Jesus saw it as a teaching moment. Speaking to all twelve he said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve....” A short time later, perhaps wanting to make sure they understood this, Jesus began the last supper by washing the feet of the disciples.

This was a bigger social faux pas than my wanting to help clear the table at the fancy lunch. In a society in which status distinctions were clear and accepted, only those of the lowest status washed the feet of others. It was so shocking that Jesus would do this that Peter initially refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet, believing Jesus was embarrassing himself.

When he was done he told them – I am your Lord and your teacher, yet I have washed your feet. If I wash your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. This was shocking given that it was the servant's job. Exactly, Jesus would say.

Jesus expects us to be servants. That is clear, but doesn't that put some above others? What about my concern of a status distinction? That is not an issue because this is not, as I misunderstood it, a devaluing of self. To say that I am a servant, is not to say that I am of less value, less importance, less worth than others. It is not a status distinction that puts us below others. Actually, it is the opposite. It does not devalue us, it demonstrates the value of others. It is to say to another you are worth my time, my effort, my attention, my care. It is to say to another, you are not a person of no consequence, someone to whom I have to pay no mind; rather you are a person to be respected and noticed and loved. Those with a servant spirit honor others. Those with a servant spirit do not say, do not bother me. They say how can I help? Jesus over and over tried to instill in us a spirit of servanthood.

This spirit can be demonstrated in big, truly sacrificial ways or in small, almost negligible ways; sometimes we notice it and sometimes we don't. We can miss it in our own lives or in the lives of others. You were all very kind to me when I first came, putting up a "Reserved for the Pastor" sign at the parking space right by the door. I appreciated that but, at the risk of seeming rude, I asked for it to please be taken down. It is one of those status distinctions that make me uneasy. It reminded me of another appointment, a church that had a very large lot with a reserved sign for the pastor. I also had that removed. I was usually one of the first to arrive on a Sunday morning so I always parked in the space furthest from the door. I figured I was able to walk and I had time, so I would save the closer spaces for those for whom walking was difficult or running late. This was a very small thing. Later I heard Adam Hamilton, one of our nationally known pastors, talk about how he always parked far away for the same reasons. He went on to say that others noticed and followed his example and soon most early comers were also parking a distance away. I shook my head and laughed to myself thinking that clearly he was more influential than I. When others saw me doing that, they thought that I must be afraid of getting my car dinged in the lot. When I told them that was not the case, and why I parked so far away, they would say, oh, that's nice, but not one single person ever joined me and started parking far away. Sometimes we get it and sometimes we don't.

We don't always get it because servanthood is not necessarily natural and, like me, we may have some feelings that actually cause us to rebel against it. But when we consider the example of Christ, and follow the example of Christ, it begins to become our natural way. I mean, if anyone deserves to be served rather than to serve, it would be Jesus. He is not just a person of power. He is not just a celebrity. He is the Son of God! Jesus could have come exhibiting so much power that every person, Caesar included, would have fallen prostrate before him, quivering, waiting for orders of how to serve. Instead, he arrived in the most humble way possible and lived his life with humility in service to others. In doing so, he did not put himself down. He lifted others up.

Paul lifted this up in his letter to the Philippians in the canticle we recited this morning. He said, "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, being born in human likeness."

This is how God Almighty has chosen to relate to us – with humility and servanthood. Can there be any doubt that this is how God wants us to relate to others? In a reversal of the world's understanding, in God's eyes greatness belongs to the one who serves.

How appropriate, then, that in the very first part of our mission statement we state that this is the kind of people we strive to be – devoted servants – completely dedicated to our God and servants among God's children. With a spirit of servanthood, we become about going out of our way for others, caring for others, giving up so others might have, using our time and efforts and resources and skills for the benefit of others, looking first toward the welfare and well-being of others. This role of servant is not thrust upon us by a society that puts each person in a place. It is a life choice modeled by our savior. Think of it this way. None of us are below having our feet washed. None of us are above washing the feet of others.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...."

Being devoted servants is a choice – a mission. Mission possible.

Amen.