

Serve or Be Served?¹

Our lesson today is quite straightforward and makes a single powerful point that is a real tonic for Christians in our generation. Simply put, discipleship is not "about," as we say, it's not about us. Jesus appeals to simple common sense. How are servants expected to behave even after they've put in a full day in the fields? Well, they come in and fix dinner for the master. That's a bracing image. We all like to work for a while and then relax and enjoy the rest and recreation that we believe follows labor. Servants--and we don't have to be living where servants are still used in order to understand this--dwell in a different order. Servants have a lower status as human beings and their existence is completely dedicated to supporting the master. So our accustomed rhythm of toil followed by recreation doesn't apply to servants.

Jesus is telling disciples that the very nature of their being is to be in service to something else. Any idea that becoming a Christian or joining a church is like an airline seat upgrade or a move to a fancier neighborhood or entrance into blissful enjoyment is fundamentally wrong-headed. It's not about you. It's not about me.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 3, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga. Additional sermons and other resources can be found at www.fpclagranger.org

Why does this need to be said? I believe that there has always been something about following Jesus that holds out promise for reward. The original disciples would tussle among themselves over who was the greatest disciple. There's a story in the Acts of the Apostles of a magician, Simon by name, who witnessed the earliest Christians doing amazing works through the power of the Holy Spirit. Well, that magician attempted to buy his way into the Church and the power of the Spirit in order to open up a fresh new line of magician services that he could provide. Of course, the original apostles scolded Simon and told him to keep his money. Here's the point. Christian faith is not a life and career enhancement program. It's being equipped to join God in his redemption of the world.

Consider how we conduct the affairs of the average church these days. Nowadays, in our country church congregations can crop up freely and people can affiliate with the church of their choice. It's called freedom of religion. But one of the consequences of our free, voluntary organization of church life is that churches compete for members. We're like restaurants. We labor to please members, to burnish our brand, to provide a good experience. What we train people to assume is that Christian discipleship itself carries an array of benefits. Come to our church, is the message, and find out the wonderful

plan God has for your life, how you can live more effectively, have a happier family. Come to our worship and have a certain kind of experience—one that's user friendly, with music that is of a type of what you listen to on the radio and a sermon that gives you useful information about how you can live better in your family life or work place.

And what's more, we have programs for every member of the family. And our programs, and we don't actually say this, but we want to send this message, our programs are better than those of the Methodists and Baptists. When we in the church market Christianity we encourage church shoppers. Church shoppers are people who are looking for a church much as they shop around for a cell phone plan.

In this marketing atmosphere we convey the message that to be a Christian is to get a lot of benefits. It's going to make us happy, effective in our relationships, better organized, and better humans.

This little parable flies in the face of all of this. No, you're servants it says. Your basic attitude is one of putting God's being and God's projects as your number one priority.

Let's do a little review. The story of God electing people to carry out his work in the world began with Abraham. God called Abraham and promised him a big family and God's blessing

forever. It was at that point when God announced the purpose for having a special people, whether Abraham's descendants or the followers of Jesus. The purpose was so that we could be a blessing for all the other people in the world. Now that missionary essence wasn't always visible during the history of Israel but it came to the surface in a very interesting point of history, during the Babylonian exile. In a time when the descendants of Abraham were pondering their failings and wondering what their future might be like, it came up to the surface again, mostly in the writings of Isaiah. We are a servant people.

Jesus really energized the servant essence of being a person of God. The first thing he told the disciples was I'm calling you for the purpose of being fishers of men—people. Then the last thing Jesus told them after he had risen from the dead. "Go to all nations and baptize. Make every human being my disciple. Teach them the kind of living that I've been trying to get you to rise up to." Wasn't it no less than C. S. Lewis who said that "the Christian church is the only organization that exists primarily for the benefit of those who don't belong to the church?"

Where did we get this idea that Christian faith revolves around me, me, me? Maybe it's because those around Jesus who

are faithful servants enjoy reward. Take Mary, Jesus' mother. Mary has been elevated by all Christians who have followed her. Her availability to be pregnant with and to deliver Jesus, her willingness to follow him have forever been recognized as a profound and joyous way to live. Mary found the secret that when you stoop lower in life by being a helper, by being humble, by setting aside the whining needs of the self, that you are on to the secret of how the human life ought to be lived.

Jesus himself demonstrated this perfectly. He already had the elevated status of living in heavenly places with whatever luxuries or fame he wanted. What he chose was something better. Jesus shed away all of the perks and bling and clout and became a normal, common human being. Notice that even in the world; Jesus refused to grab a higher status than that of common person. Jesus lived entirely in the service of God's project in the world. And notice what happened to him. He sits on the right hand of the Father.

There was a curious incident in the course of Jesus' ministry. Two of his disciples, the brothers James and John, approached Jesus privately with a request. "Lord, it doesn't hurt to ask, but will you pull strings so that my brother and I can sit up there in heaven, maybe me at your right and my brother on the other side?" Jesus' answer really is the heart

of this sermon. "Hey, guys, you don't just get in line to be in heaven. You don't get that kind of status because of who you know. You get there by walking the path of self-offering, and suffering and crucifixion.

Now, isn't our lesson today pressing the same searing truth on you and me? What if it's true? I mean, what if we're getting perfectly what the lesson says, that you and I are not here to be pampered, but we're nominated for responsibility? That means in an instant we're all missionaries. In your neighborhood, place of work, wherever you go, you are God's man or woman with a task—to make real the love and transformation that God is bringing to that little sphere.

And if we're basically missionaries, when we are together as we are in this moment, there's a certain acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord. Culture isn't Lord, social class isn't lord, tradition isn't lord, money isn't lord. Jesus Christ, the human face of God is Lord and his reign already flourishes among us and whatever we're busy with. Our task is to make that real in a world that will one day be completely saved and healed by God.

Our lesson from the New Testament is the assigned passage for this day. Curiously, one of our members—Julie Patton--last week sent me a quote from a book by David Platt. I knew neither David Platt, nor the book. But the quote she pulled out

summarizes this sermon better than I could. The fact that this came in free of charge like a gift from God in the same week that we're working on the passage about the servants makes me think that I ought to just end the sermon with these words:

"If you were to ask the average Christian sitting in a worship service on Sunday morning to summarize the message of Christianity, you would most likely hear something along the lines of "The message of Christianity is that God loves me enough to send his Son, Jesus, to die for me." As wonderful as this sentiment sounds, is it biblical? Isn't it incomplete, based on what we have seen in the Bible? "God loves me" is not the essence of biblical Christianity. Because if "God loves me" is the message of Christianity, then who is the object of Christianity?

God loves me. Me. Christianity's object is me.

Therefore, when I look for a church, I look for the music that best fits me, and the programs that best cater to me and my family. When I make plans for my life and career, it is about what works best for me and my family. When I consider the car I will drive, the clothes I will wear, the way I will live, I will choose according to what is best for me. This is the version of Christianity that largely prevails in our culture.

But it is not biblical Christianity. The message of biblical Christianity is not "God loves me period", as if we were the object of our own faith.

The message of biblical Christianity is "God loves me so that I might make Him - His ways - His salvation - His glory - and His greatness - known among all nations.