

**“On Servanthood”**  
**(Mark 9:30-37; Proverbs 31:10-31; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a)**

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**Rev. J. Koyama**

**A Graduation**

Way back when I was living in Hawaii, I attended the graduation ceremony for one of the large local high schools. During the ceremony, the valedictorian spoke about how the sky is the limit and how grateful he was that the teachers had given him the tools to do all the things he wanted to achieve in life. I waited for the moment when he or one of the other speakers would say something about how important it is to use what we have been given in service to others. But that moment never came.

I was crestfallen. Somewhere in all of the euphoria, the idea that the students were being prepared to contribute to the common good was never emphasized. And so, the basic message seemed to be that all of the effort and sacrifice that parents and teachers make is so that the students can embark on a life devoted purely to self-enrichment and that being of service to others is a side choice, if it is to be considered at all.

## The Gospel Perspective

This morning's Gospel clarifies that, for followers of Jesus, that orientation is not an option. The emphasis is the other way around. First and foremost, those who follow him are to be servants, not of any worldly master, but of God's love for the world. And so, putting ourselves first, to the exclusion of others, is a repudiation of the way of Jesus.

Let's go to the reading. Jesus has just observed his disciples arguing. It is very likely that he knows that what they have been arguing about, but he asks anyway. They have been arguing over "who among them is the greatest". But the silence that follows Jesus's asking, tells us that the disciples know that what they have been doing will not please him.

Jesus has only recently shared with them that, in giving up their lives for the sake of the good news, they will gain a life for their souls that is truly worth living. And yet, here he finds them behaving as though he had never spoken these words; in one ear and out the other. Instead of focusing on how they will let go of their old ways, they are busy trying to secure and shore up their lives, so as not to lose them - by jockeying for preferred status.

There is something very petty, but also very serious and fear-laden about what the disciples are engaged in. Climbing the social ladder by associating with those who were more powerful was how you obtained personal security in the ancient world.

One commentator describes the disciples as being a bit like zebras trying not to be one that is on the outskirts of the herd, where the weaker members will get picked off by lions. Being in the middle or at the head of the herd is serious business for zebras who want to survive.

And I think that a similar instinct for survival applies to us. Although we live in a world that is very different from that of the disciples, our ability to position ourselves favorably in society and in the economy still has a powerful effect on whether we will get good health care, eat good food and have financial security and free time. I don't think anyone can wave these concerns away as inconsequential.

And yet there is something faithless about being obsessed with such things to the point of forgetting the needs of others. When our hearts and minds become absorbed in constantly calculating what is in our own self-interest, our focus falls away from trust in God's abundant grace and from God's power to provide and our lives become a lonely and stressful struggle to protect ourselves.

Elsewhere, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this point in a way that seems almost like anathema to our society. He says,

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.”

There is something carefree and beautiful about this freedom from worry. But as a practical matter it sits uneasily with us. We put a lot of emphasis on personal responsibility and on the idea that we should be devoted to generating security for ourselves and building our own nest eggs. Our greatest fear, is it not, is of becoming a burden to others, because we have failed to provide for ourselves.

Still, whether we find it uncomfortable or not, there is a clear difference here between the way of Jesus and the ways of the world. As much as we feel compelled by worldly reason to focus our energies on making sure every transaction meets our own needs, the emphasis, for Jesus, is on caring for others in a way that actually subverts this self-centered approach. And he demonstrates this by picking up a child and saying to his disciples, “whoever welcomes this child welcomes me.”

Why he directs his attention to a nearby child at this point may seem somewhat unclear to us today, but it was clear to his contemporaries in

the ancient world. Children were at the bottom of the pecking order. And in a world in which a person's security came from sucking up to the people above you on the social ladder, spending time with a child offered no means of personal gain. And so, by attending to the child, Jesus is letting his disciples know that the relationships he approves of are those that are engaged in without regard for personal gain.

I once overheard a young man sharing his thoughts about doing good. He said, "I don't think a person should do good things as a way to get into heaven. A person should do good because it's the right thing to do." I thought this was a wonderful insight. So simple and yet so wise. Of course, there is nothing wrong with being rewarded for the good we do. But, for the doer, there is nothing beyond earthly gain that comes of doing good with the expectation of an earthly reward. A truly beautiful act of giving, one that unlocks a heavenly treasure chest, is done completely apart from any selfish calculation.

This is why, later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us, "when you do a good deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." In other words, let the good you do be done apart from any calculation of personal gain.

## Proverbs

The reading from Proverbs fits nicely with this train of thought, because the woman who is being celebrated provides us with a great example of someone who does good in a way that is always focused on the needs of others. Yet even so, as a consequence of the good she does, her own life is greatly enhanced and her status in the eyes of others is greatly increased.

You may have already guessed that it is a controversial passage. Some commentators point out that the reading creates a trap for today's women because of the way it describes the good wife as someone who basically does it all. And so, if we read it as an expectation for how women should be, we are setting a bar that is too high. In other words, no-one can live up to selflessly being everything for everybody. And a lot of women today are stuck in that very dilemma. Notice also that the husband's and children's role in this proverb is simply to say, "Wow, isn't mom great? She does everything!"

Still, if we acknowledge that there are pitfalls in this reading, it can function well as an expression of admiration and gratitude, as a celebration of the people, both female and male, who do an admirable job of serving the community in ways all the ways that the Proverb enumerates. There are people in our lives who deserve to be

celebrated at the city gates both for their service and for the beauty of spirit that underlies their actions. And in celebrating them, we find the inspiration to do likewise.

It is also worth noticing that, in the woman in the Proverb is not without status. She is, in fact highly revered and considered great by those around her. But none of her greatness is based on any kind of self-centered jockeying for power or position. Her greatness is in her even-handed commitment to a life of servanthood.

### **James**

I don't think that there is anyone here this morning, who is not here partly because they were fortunate enough to know people like this. They inspire the best in us. And yet, it seems to me that nowadays, there is a shortage of people who are truly great in this way.

Perhaps it is because, in the elation with which we graduate into the freedom of adulthood these days, the notion of giving back is too often lost. Perhaps, there has been such a proliferation of opportunities for personal advancement that our society holds out to us, that the call to give back is too easily drowned out. Or maybe I am less wide-eyed and naïve than I was as a child, and people have always been this way.

The fact that so many young people today are not adequately exposed to role models who embody the beauty that radiates from servanthood as Christ modeled it for us, is a great tragedy, to my mind. We are, as our reading from James put it, a society mired in conflict, plagued by double-mindedness.

I'd like to read a few lines of it again and ask, doesn't this describe what our society is mired in?

If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

I think this is a powerful, albeit a harshly negative description, of what ails our culture today. We and our children are drowning in a sea of choices that are driven by personal envies and ambitions. We ask, but

do not receive what we need for life, because “we ask wrongly, in order to spend what we get on our pleasures”.

Now, more than ever, we and our children need to be exposed to people of good character, people who ask God, not for things that lead to personal gratification or security, but for those things that will help us to meet the true needs of the world.

Listen to this prayer that Solomon made when he first became King over Israel:

O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. <sup>8</sup> And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. <sup>9</sup> Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil...

And now listen to God’s response:

<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup> And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup> behold, I now do according to your word.

What is clear in this exchange is that even Solomon, who was King over all Israel, did not understand his exalted social position as an

opportunity for feeding his own personal ambitions (at least that is true at this point in his life). He understood himself primarily as a servant and he received what he asked for, because he asked rightly, as a servant who's desire is for the well-being of those he served.

### **Conclusion**

What I take from this morning's readings is how important it is for us to understand that the salvation Jesus holds out to us, as Christians, is not about the fulfillment of our personal ambitions. It is about the truth and beauty that enters our lives when we recognize that we were created to be servants of God's love for the world and begin to live into it.

That servanthood, modeled on Jesus, is the legacy we have received from the saints who have gone before us, and it is that legacy that I think we must be bold to impress upon a generation that is now casting about and praying that God will show them something truly worth living for. That legacy of servanthood is essential. It is what gives our civilization the deep roots that strengthen and enrich it. With it there is hope and without it, we dry up and blow away.