



“Service”

Mark 10:35-45

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

October 21, 2012

Some of us are blessed with wonderful mother-in-laws. I was, but some of you had no such luck. You know how it feels to spend an entire weekend with clinched teeth. Marjorie Thompson shares how difficult her mother-in-law can be. And Marjorie could not simply bite her tongue, smile and take it on the chin for a few days until her mother-in-law went home, because each year her mother-in-law came and stayed with Marjorie and her husband for a full month.

Marjorie chafed at some of her mother-in-law’s traits and behaviors. Conversations with her were strained and predictable. After a few days, Marjorie found herself checking the calendar and counting how many more days she would have to endure her irritating in-law.

Marjorie has spent years writing books and leading spiritual retreats that focus on our prayer life. Her mother-in-law was the focus of many of her prayers. To her credit, Marjorie did not pray for God to take her mother-in-law peacefully during the night before Marjorie strangled her! Instead, she prayed for patience, understanding and help in creating a new relationship with her mother-in-law.

Prayer can pave the way to the unimaginable, because her mother-in-law has now lived in Marjorie’s home for more than eight years. Living with her daily helped Marjorie see things about her that she was blind to during the shorter visits. Marjorie says, “Like all of us, she has strengths along with her limitations...she has strong reactions, preferences, and resistance to certain ideas. I readily admit that even with increased understanding, exercising patience can still be trying. A good dose of her stubbornness can elicit my immediate impatience. But in general, I have observed over the years that my capacity to bear with her limitations has grown. I have learned to reach out to her with little acts of love that she herself would never request but deeply needs. She accepts a kiss from me on the cheek each night, and I see that it feeds her heart.”

Also, Marjorie gives her mother-in-law occasional neck and foot massages and Marjorie has come to realize that these acts of caring help her to become more patient and tender. Marjorie has gained an even deeper insight: we become truly compassionate when we have no clue as to what is behind a person’s repellent behavior. There are always reasons, whether we can pinpoint them or not. It is not essential for us to know the reasons in order to extend kindness to difficult people.¹

This fall we are exploring what it means for 21st Century Christians to have faith. I’m suggesting that what the word *faith* has represented since the Enlightenment – believing certain church doctrines – needs overhauling. We need to go back to what the Christian faith entailed before any creeds were created. Originally, having faith meant following Jesus, and to discover what following Jesus means, we focus on the core virtues that Jesus embodied and the kind of life he called his followers to live.

Two weeks ago we began with love because in the Christian faith everything begins with love and flows out of love. Christian love is not simply a feeling, but is revealed in acts of compassion and kindness. Last week we looked at another key component of the Christian life: generosity. Today we are focused on serving the needs of others.

In our passage from the Gospel of Mark, we read that Jesus was preparing his disciples to become leaders. As leaders they would have authority over others, but Jesus wanted them to think seriously about the manner in which they would exercise authority. Would they be like the Gentile leaders who act like tyrants over the people?

I can imagine the disciples protesting, “No, Jesus. We would not act like tyrants. Come on, you know us better than that. We won’t make unfair demands on people. We’ll be good leaders. We will make you proud.”

Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

The disciples were surely jolted by his use of the word “slave,” but Jesus frequently used hyperbole to shake things up. He intended for his words to grate against their nerves because he sought to turn conventional wisdom on its head and to force them to rethink how they saw themselves in relation to others. Consciously or unconsciously, they thought of leaders as over and above others. Leaders give orders; leaders tell others what to do. That’s what Caiaphas the high priest does; it is what Caesar does; it is what leaders do.

However, Jesus wants to explode their assumptions of leadership and replace them with something radically different. He wants them to grasp the notion of leadership as servanthood. He is a living example of such leadership. He does not attempt to get people to serve him; his entire ministry is based on reaching out to others.

Writing from a Nazi prison shortly before he was executed, Dietrich Bonhoeffer pondered the future of the Christian Church and wrote: “The church is the church only when it exists for others...The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell [people] what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.”²

The notion that we would focus on others rather than ourselves, that we would focus outward rather than inward flows against much in popular culture. It also goes against many of our internal impulses. When we have needs – whether physical or emotional – we try to fulfill those needs. Yet, we know we must be careful because some of what we want is good for us and some of what we think we want can destroy us – greed and lust come quickly to mind.

Many people will say they just want to be happy, but what will make us happy? The latest iPad, two weeks in Europe, successful children, a robust portfolio. These things would make me happy, but they are not enough. Living only for my own needs cannot fulfill all of my needs.

Matthieu Ricard is known to science as the happiest man in the world. When studied along with hundreds of others, the upbeat impulses measured in his brain were off the chart. If he is the happiest person, what is his secret to happiness? He says, “Seeking happiness for oneself alone is doomed to certain failure, since self-centeredness is the very source of our discontent...Even if we show all the outward signs of happiness, we cannot be truly happy if we fail to take an interest in the happiness of others.”³

This is what Jesus is saying in today’s passage. He is talking about the basic attitude we have toward others. We can see ourselves in competition with others or we can see ourselves as seeking the well-being of others. When you are around someone who focuses on herself, you start edging for the door, but when you are around someone who cares about you, it strikes a positive chord within you.

Serving the needs of another can be richly fulfilling, but there is also a danger. If we seek to serve only out of duty, if we do it only as a response to a command, we can become self-righteous and bitter. The spirit in which we do something for another is critical.

Listen to this modern day parable. A man worked his entire life to develop a farm that would support his family. After working many years tilling the land and fighting the elements to feed and shelter his family, he came to a time when he felt it was appropriate to retire. His son was strong and able, and having a family of his own, it seemed time for him to take over. So the man handed the farm over to this son and settled into a comfortable life.

Initially, his son felt proud to be the master of his own farm. As time went on, he began to resent his father's inactivity. His father sat on the porch, bouncing his grandchildren on his knee, while he had to work all day. He began to look at his father as just one more mouth to feed. He thought to himself, "I have my wife and children to take care of now. My father doesn't get it. He just takes it easy. This is hard work and I wish I didn't have to take care of him, too." The son continued hoeing and planting, and growing more bitter by the day.

At harvest time he wasn't sure if he had enough food for his family plus the useless old man on the porch. The son thought to himself, "His time is over. Why is he still around?"

So the son built a great wooden box of heavy teak, and when it was complete, he put the box on a wheelbarrow, wheeled it over to the porch and said firmly to his father, "Dad, get in this box. Do it now." His father climbed off the porch and into the box. The son closed the heavy lid over his father and snapped the sturdy brass hinge. Wheeling the box to a cliff, he was about to tip it over the edge when he heard a knocking from within.

"What do you want?" the son said gruffly. From within the box came his father's soft voice, "You know, I understand. I really do. You think I'm just a useless old man. But if you want to throw me over the cliff, what I would do is take me out of the box and just throw my body over. I would save this box if I were you. I think your children may have use for it someday!"⁴

When caring for another becomes no more than duty, our patience grows short and our list of complaints grows long. If Christianity is reduced to following commands, then the life of faith becomes little more than obligation and the vitality that comes with doing something noble is completely lost. But if we seek to serve others as Jesus served, with compassion and a generous spirit, our serving not only gives a boost to others, it nourishes our own souls and helps to heal the world.

One theologian says that the "most important single move in the life of faith is to escape the prison of self, the dungeon of self-absorption."⁵

In some ways, serving others is counterintuitive, but if you freely choose to give yourself for the well-being of another you will experience the joy and satisfaction that comes with following Jesus.

NOTES

1. Marjorie J. Thompson, "Habits of a Whole Heart," in *A Spiritual Life*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p.57-58.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York: MacMillan, 1971), p.382-383.
3. Matthieu Ricard, *The Art of Meditation*, (London: Atlantic Books), 2008, p.17-18.
4. Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, *Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit and the Heart*, (San Francisco; HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. p.24-245.
5. Robin Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, (San Francisco: HarperOne), 2009, p.129.