

**SERVANTS OF LOVE**  
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October 18, 2015  
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church  
Mark 10:35-45

In our Gospel story for today Jesus and the disciples are *on the road* (or “*on the way*”) **up** to Jerusalem, where *we* know (and the gospel writer knows, since he is reflecting here on events some 40 years in his past) that Jesus is going to suffer, and be killed. In that light, Mark has Jesus here trying to explain just what being *on the way* is going to mean—its the third time in Mark’s telling that Jesus has tried to prepare his disciples, and the third time they will fail to get it. Our reading picks up with James and John, missing the point pretty spectacularly; just after Jesus tells them that he is going to be betrayed, condemned, mocked, spit on, flogged, killed... then rise again, they reply (starting with Mark 10:35):

*“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.”*

So a lively conversation follows, in which Jesus observes that in their world, the so-called great ones are rulers and tyrants whose glory comes from brute strength, lording power over others.

And he concludes: *“But it is not so among you... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

For the word of Love in scripture, for the word of Love among us, for the word of Love within us (thanks be to God)

The dust has mostly settled from Pope Francis’ recent whirlwind visit to these United States. And it still seems to me that something quite extraordinary has just taken place right in our very midst. Just the capacity of this one old Latin dude in weird clothes to unite a diverse and divided people, to captivate our national attention for more than 30 seconds, and even to inspire a little bit conversation about *stuff that actually matters*, seems pretty miraculous to me. From the throne of the oldest monarchy on the planet, this pope manages to exude humility, simple love and light, authentic goodness and humor in way that connects people to each other and something bigger. I think Francis is a living breathing example of what we talked about last year in our study of the mystics—a true “pioneer of the human spirit”, showing us what is possible for human being and becoming.

My favorite moment was when the little girl broke through the security barriers during his parade through Washington. And as Secret Service agents dove for this tiny figure, Francis just brushed off those powerful ones, and fully welcomed that little child. He turned down lunch with the congressional power people, where arguably he might have exerted some additional serious influence. Instead, he broke bread with the entirely power-less from Washington’s homeless community, exerting his influence in an entirely different way. All along the way, he embodies and imparts deep spiritual wisdom with significant public implications, while still, somehow, managing to stay just above the partisan fray.

In his address to the US Congress, Francis quoted our own Declaration of Independence, in order to remind a polarized and morally bankrupt body (not to mention, a morally confused nation) that “all political activity must serve and promote the good of the human person and be based on

respect for his or her dignity. It is an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as one the greatest common good..."

At a conference that Jeff I attended recently called "the Francis Factor" we heard Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr claim that this papacy is historic because it is the first time in history that we've had a pope who is also a prophet. In other words, God is doing something entirely new here, so we might want to pay attention.

Prophets have almost always existed on the margins. Francis of Assisi, from whom this pope draws his identity, famously stripped naked in the town square, in a symbolic gesture of rejecting the middle class garb and values of his family. That Francis also refused clerical robes, preferring instead the rags of the poor and the freedom of the unordained. His whole life was his critique, and his influence is still being felt 800 years later. Pope Francis did accept the papal crown, but on the night of his election, he too threw off the sumptuous fur cloak of papal tradition. He has refused to live in the papal palace, and has rejected those \$3000 red Prada shoes of his predecessor.

Now, full disclosure—I am something of a Roman-terian. I am deeply rooted in Presbyterian tradition, but have this ongoing attraction to deep spiritual wisdom wherever I can find it (in our world, we need all the wisdom there is). Some 15 years ago, when I set out to pursue systematic study of spirituality I discovered that the real creative, scholarly work in this brand new academic field was being done almost exclusively in Catholic institutions. So I found myself in a magical place called the Washington Theological Union, a seminary funded not by Rome, but by a consortium of contemplative religious orders (wisdom at the margins!). It was a community where the introductory question was never "what do you do" or "where are you from" but rather "what order are in" ... Franciscan, Carmelite, Benedictine... and there I was: Pcusu? I was at the margin of the margins, and it was glorious.

Among many other things, I discovered a whole lot more in common with the progressive Catholic family than much of the very divided and divisive Protestant world. I delighted in the connections between the "this worldliness" of Presbyterianism and the very creation centeredness of the Franciscans (in fact, I'd wager a tidy sum that Calvin encountered Francis somewhere along with line, so clear are the theological parallels.) Both traditions insist that science and faith belong together, both are committed to education and social justice. And each one has just a little bit to teach the other; when they come together both are made more whole. I also discovered the beauty of ancient Christian wisdom and practice that is our shared heritage. Christian history did not, it turns out, begin in 1517 with Martin Luther's prophetic critique. I've come to appreciate the observation that while most Catholics still don't understand why the Reformation was necessary, most Protestants don't understand why it was tragic. We all lost way too much. And lets be real here--Jesus said nothing about sexuality, gay marriage, birth control, abortion, weed, or guns, papal authority, justification or transubstantiation; what he did talk about a lot was unity: *I have come so that you may be one*, he said. A lot.

Pope Francis embodies this preference toward wholeness. As Fr. Richard says, this pope is all about tearing down boundaries and building bridges, valuing people above ideas, facts more than ideology. He is a wholemaker. And Pope Francis, like St. Francis, like Jesus, calls us to a whole new understanding of what it means to serve.

In our story today, when James and John start going on about glory and greatness Jesus answers: *you will become great only when you become servant and slave*. Now, please note, women especially, these are not job descriptions. Jesus is not telling us to give up all sense of self and safety and work ourselves to death for the sake of the other. This is about identity, a sense of self that is bound up in relationship with the other—the slave literally has no identity apart from the master, and we only discover our true identity as God's Beloved, when we realize authentic connection with deep self, one another, the world we live in; this is connection with the Holy. The story ends with Jesus'

insistence that the Son of Man, *incarnation of the Holy One*, is first and foremost, servant too. God, it turns out, is not master, God is slave, inextricably bound up in relationship with God's own creation. God can only be God *for and with us*.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a marvelous contemporary wisdom teacher (and physician, in fact teacher of physicians), says that *servicing* represents a particular way of seeing life. When we see life as weak, we are moved to help; when we see life as broken, we seek to fix it. When we see life as sacred, whole and interconnected, then we are moved to serve.

These perspectives change outcomes. When I help, I feel strong. When I fix I feel competent. And as my ego is fed, I distance myself from the other. And they are disempowered. "When we serve," she writes, "we know that we belong to life... that we are all connected: all suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy... service is not an experience of strength or expertise; service is an experience of mystery, surrender and awe..." and it is right there that our work and our lives are transformed into practice. Remen's wisdom, by the way, has come through suffering; it derives in part from her own devastating experiences with the pain and indignities of Crohn's disease. To serve, she insists, is less about doing, and more about connecting--with God, self, and others.

Among Pope Francis' first papal words was an extraordinary invitation that he has repeated everywhere: pray for me. In his Washington visit this became even more inclusive: don't forget to pray for me, he said, and if you don't pray at least send some good wishes. Pray for me, which I think also means pray with me; hope and dream with me. Let us join together and imagine a better, more whole, more peaceful, more joyful world. Let us seek together to become servants of love.

And as we do, we might reflect, prayerfully and often: where in life am I—or we?-- being invited to connect? What sacred wholeness am I being invited to notice, to nurture, to serve? What am I trying to fix or help that really needs my love and service.

Remen writes: "We do not serve the weak or the broken. What we serve is the wholeness in each other and the wholeness in life... unlike helping and fixing and rescuing, service is mutual. There are many ways to serve and strengthen the life around us: through friendship or parenthood or work, by kindness, by compassion, by generosity or acceptance. Through our philanthropy, our example, our encouragement, our active participation, our belief. No matter how we do this, our service will (also) bless us."

May it be so.