

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
MATTHEW 21:23-32

Christ's Servanthood and Ours

“Lord, whose love through humble service bore the weight of human need, who upon the cross, forsaken, offered mercy’s perfect deed, we our servants, bring the worship not of voice alone, but heart, consecrating to your purpose every gift that you impart.” Amen. (Hymn #610, The Hymnal 1982)

“Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Is what I just read the words of a particularly eloquent and pertinent editorial writer or constituent to those governmental and economic leaders who are working, hopefully, to find an effective and fair solution to our current national financial crises? Well, that wasn’t the original reason they were written, but if anyone wants to quote St. Paul’s Letter to the Church in Philippi, which just “happened” to be assigned to be read in churches this weekend, I think it would be very appropriate to send these words to Washington.

Paul is talking about *servanthood*, something I haven’t heard nearly enough about from any of the candidates this year. When I was a boy, I remember hearing *these* words from Washington, D.C., “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Anybody recognize those words? Anyone remember who said them? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?

Service and sacrifice are still highly honored concepts in our country – lived out especially by a lot of people who wear uniforms. We should never forget the service and sacrifice of those who wear the uniform of our country, often in dangerous and difficult circumstances, striving for freedom for others. Whatever anyone may think about the policy decisions of political leaders, the service and sacrifice of those who are in harm’s way should always be honored – and they should be cared for before, during and after their service. And can we ever forget the New York City fire fighters who, seven years ago, climbed *up* the stairs of the World trade Center while anyone else who could move was climbing *down*?

We have countless examples of service and sacrifice both here and around the world – now not just in response to the recent hurricanes, though they come to mind, but throughout life, especially working with places, people and situations where *normal life* is a crisis. Darfur, Haiti, Somalia, Zimbabwe – we’d be here all day if we pondered all the places and people where examples of service and sacrifice abound, where people “look not to their own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Plenty of people – especially very wealthy and well-connected people – have been going to Washington lately to ask what their country can do for them. Something must

be done, in fact, because all of our lives are bound up together in one economy, one nation, one world, but I'm afraid we could be waiting a long time if we wait for Washington and Wall Street to set us an example of servanthood and self-sacrifice.

But while they should also be followers of that mantra of servanthood and sacrifice, we should never expect them to be the ones for us to model our lives after. Rather, to continue to quote St. Paul's letter to *us* as well as to the Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, whom, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

Christ is our example of servanthood and sacrifice.

So let's forget politicians, financiers, celebrities and other newsmakers and think about each of us as individuals, and this congregation as *a community of servants*.

In an age of entitlement and self-indulgence when people who take risks which *others* will pay for if they don't pan out are glorified, we, as Christians, are called to be counter-cultural. Some people, as I have said, understand service and sacrifice very, very well, but that is not the dominant spirit of our age. *Especially because of that*, it needs to be *our* spirit.

The two greatest commandments are to love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls and all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Those are very counter-cultural concepts in any age which considers the fundamental question of life to be, "What's in it for me?"

What can any of us do in a world so large, so precarious, and so full of challenges? **We can serve, and serve with joy, vigor, humility and teamwork**, glorifying God and helping others in simple, achievable ways.

The Time and Talent enclosure to your *service* leaflet outlines a number of ways to help which may make a bigger impact than you'd think. None of them entail taking the kinds of risks of self-sacrifice of the heroes and heroines I have referred to, but all make a difference.

They include and go beyond ministries in this building – but let's start here, in mission headquarters. In a world where the belief "it's all about me" is so prevalent, *worship* reminds us that God is God, and we aren't. There are a variety of servant ministries which help to deepen and enrich our worship, from the many musical opportunities listed, to acolyting, serving in the Altar Guild or as a greeter, lector or usher. You may never know how much what you do in these ministries may mean to others. For example, a warm but non-intrusive welcome to a first-time visitor might mean a lot to someone who's deeply hungry spiritually but might have had little positive experience with churches.

Worship includes prayer – Sunday intercessions, prayer chain, prayer group and individual prayers after services – all of which are free services offered for anyone.

Pastoral care provides many opportunities to *serve* in what may seem simple and unremarkable ways – but *the recipients – and God – assign the value*. Take “help with lunch after a funeral”, a simple ministry of hospitality. A few years ago, I received a phone call from a funeral director asking if I would do a funeral for a non-parishioner. I said of course. A deeply disturbed young man had thrown himself in front of the Philadelphia to New York express train. His widow was devastated and also was new in the community and unconnected to any church. We did his funeral and then *served* his family afterwards. Love your neighbor. We made a difference.

Teaching Sunday school or helping in Vacation Bible School may be pretty simple things – and you don’t need a Doctor of Divinity degree to do either! But simple can still be deeply meaningful: being one of the people through whom children come to know God better. What an honor; what an opportunity for service. They aren’t going to get taught about God in public school – or on TV, and probably not on the internet. People need people to join them in a journey of faith, fellow servants of God. You may not realize how much difference you’re making.

There are plenty of supportive, hands-on ministries which may not seem glamorous or life-changing, but which all help make our community be the best it can be, whether those labeled “Support” or “Fellowship” or “Maintenance and Repair”. Being the quarterback is the glamour job on a football team, but there aren’t too many successful quarterbacks who don’t have good Offensive Lines!

Mission is the most obvious way we make a difference both within and beyond these four walls. While politicians bicker and dither, we are feeding people at the Soup Kitchen in New Brunswick, and at Ronald McDonald House, supplying food banks in Franklin and South Brunswick, and we have once again the opportunity to be the leading church in the annual South Brunswick CROP Walk against hunger, helping people from here to Darfur. We help staff the Men’s Shelter every winter in New Brunswick, and for over 16 years we have been steady supporters of women and children who are survivors of domestic violence through our work with shelters in Middlesex and Somerset counties.

Our Mission priorities are the struggles against hunger and homelessness, against domestic violence, and also against addiction. Through our Recovery Ministries team here we celebrate the hope God gives for recovery from addiction to all who are impacted by it on our annual “recovery Sunday”, and we offer education and care year-round. As I speak, there are people getting sober 8,000 miles away as well because of our efforts as part of Global Outreach for Addiction Leadership and Learning. And there are A.I.D.S. orphans getting fed and getting more schooling because of our efforts.

Our work in Kenya – and now, with the West African country of Liberia, where we are joining with other Episcopal churches in our area to help rebuild a school which was destroyed in that country’s Civil War – is part of our affirmation that *every person is equally valuable to God*. The world does not recognize that, but we do, so part of who we are is to be a part of the struggle against racism, and part of that is simply taking joy in the wondrous diversity of our congregation and learning and growing together. Want to go deeper? Check out the Ministry of Racial Diversity.

Opportunities for service are also opportunities for personal growth. They do involve sacrifices of time and energy – precious commodities for all of us – but all of our

sacrifices are very, very small compared to the one whose supreme self-sacrifice opened the door to salvation for all. Let me also add that the green Time & Talent sheet this year only invites you to check off new ministries, either because you are new here in the last year or because you'd like to try something you haven't done, at least in the past year. (So, if you're continuing to serve in the Altar Guild, say, you don't have to check that off.) Second, if you try something and discover you really don't like it, just tell someone and graciously bow out. You're not stuck with it, and you can try something else instead.

Service and sacrifice may be foreign words to some people in our country, but they aren't to us. Nobody can do everything, but everyone *can* do something.

Together, we can make a difference. Together, with faith, we can witness God making a way out of no way in our lives and in the lives of others – just as God made water flow from a rock in the desert for the Israelites. Together, we can be like the son in Jesus' story in today's Gospel who by his *actions* showed his obedience to his father's command. Together, we can be there for each other and for the world, with Christ as our inspiration, guide and strength.

Let us commit ourselves by standing and reading together the rest of the words of Hymn #610, the first verse of which I quoted at the beginning.

“Still your children wander homeless; still the hungry cry for bread;
still the captives long for freedom; still in grief we mourn your dead.
As, O Lord, your deep compassion healed the sick and freed the soul,
use the love your Spirit kindles still to save and make us whole.

“As we worship, grant us vision, til your love's revealing light,
in its height and depth and greatness, dawns upon our quickened sight,
making known the deeds and burdens your compassion bids us bear,
stirring us to tireless striving, your abundant life to share.

“Called by worship to your service, forth in your dear name we go,
to the child, the youth, the aged, love in living deeds to show;
hope and health, good will and comfort, counsel, aid, and peace we give,
that your servants, Lord, in freedom, may your mercy know and live.”

Amen.

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