

Beyond the Doors: Sharing a Life that Really Matters
“The Door of Service”
Luke 22:24-30

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists, Newton and Maxwell, from his wall and replaced them with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. When asked why, Einstein explained it this way; “The time has come to replace the image of success with the image of service.” It would be a meaningful day of worship today if that were to happen in the hearts and lives in those of us who gather here. The time has come to replace the image of success with the image of service.

The word *servant* is mentioned 500 times in the Bible. Here, in the scripture lesson for today, Jesus says, “*The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.*” What is this reversal of values, this alternate life style, this pursuit of discipleship that Jesus considered so urgent for followers then and now? Come let us take a closer look.

SERVANTHOOD IS A NEW WAY OF THINKING

The setting for this teaching is the upper room on the night of Jesus’ arrest and trial. Jesus has just transformed the Jewish Passover into Holy Communion by breaking bread and calling it his body and passing the cup and calling it his blood. He has warned the disciples about denial and betrayal. Our scripture for today opens with these words, “*A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.*” Catch the picture. Jesus is talking about dying for the sins of the world and the disciples are arguing about position and promotion when the shift happens.

It is scary to realize that a dozen men could be in the company of Jesus day after day, listen to his teaching, watch his ways, and still not get it. They failed to have a clue that Jesus lived by different values.

Sometimes I wonder if we get it any better than the disciples? We have heard it all before. We have read it; and yet do we really get it? Life is not about you, or your wants, your wishes, your desires, your needs. Life is not about me or my plans, my goals, my aspirations, my dreams. Life is about serving God by serving others.

Paul calls himself a love slave of Jesus Christ, a slave being set free who chose to freely devote himself to his master. Former astronaut, Colonel John B. Irwin, was part of the crew that made a successful moon walk. He said in a speech after his voyage, “As I was returning to earth, I realized that I was a servant not a celebrity. So I am here as God’s servant on planet earth to share what I have experienced that others might know the glory of God.”

Life is not about winning. If you are a basketball fan that is hard to admit in March! Reality TV shows, *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, *Fear Factor*, *Average Joe*, would have us all believe that life is all about winning. Vince Lombardi of the Green Bay Packers used to say “Winning isn’t

everything, it's the only thing.”

Former President Jimmy Carter discovered something different. In 1980, with double digit inflation and the hostage situation in Iran, Jimmy Carter found himself unemployed. The 39th president of the United States could have gone home to write his memoirs and enjoy the spoils of his days in the White House.

Instead, he went home to become the most effective ex-President this country has ever known. He has traveled all over the world working for peace and justice. Nowhere is his presence more widely recognized than when he goes for a week each summer to build a Habitat House, not for a photo shoot but to actually work alongside volunteers.

Life is not about controlling. Put ten chickens in a pen together, spread a little feed on the floor, and in short order these chickens, previously strangers, will form a hierarchy based on power and control. They will determine through a series of skirmishes who will be chicken #1, chicken number #2, all the way down to number #10. They will form what we know as a pecking order.

Put people together in a room, spread a little food around on the tables and something similar will take place. There might not be clucking and pecking but there will be discussions and debates that will establish the pecking order. We soon assume our worth lies in proportion to our power, defined as how many people or resources we can control. But life is more than power and control.

Jesus said you are not created to scratch in the dirt with the chickens. The Gentiles lord it over others and exercise authority. But you are not to be like that. The one who rules should be as the one who serves.

Servanthood becomes our central reason for being. We were born to serve. *“Serve the Lord with gladness.” “Whatever you do for the least, you do for Christ.” “Whoever wants to become great, must be your servant.” “Ask not what others can do for you. Ask what you can do for others.”*

Empowering others by serving them is greater than overpowering them. Being on their side to help them win is better than competing with them to help you win. Greatness in the kingdom of God is more important than greatness in the board room. Authority is not to be lorded over others. Use your power to create not destroy. Serving the table is more Christ-like than sitting at the table.

SERVANTHOOD IS A NEW WAY OF FEELING

“People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” John Maxwell says effective leaders know that you have to first touch people’s hearts before you ask them for a hand. Servant leaders know they develop credibility with people when they connect with them and show them that they genuinely want to help.

To lead yourself, use your head; to lead others, use your heart. It was Christmas 1990. Thousands of U.S. soldiers were deployed in the Persian Gulf War far away from their families. General Norman Schwarzkopf could have spent the day in his barracks. Instead he decided to mix with the troops. He went to the mess hall where long lines of soldiers were waiting to be served. He shook hands with every one. Then he went behind the serving counters to greet the cooks and helpers, then worked his way through the mess

hall hitting every table. By the time he circulated through the second and third dining facility, it was time to start all over again. In the course of four hours, he shook nearly 4,000 hands. Why? Leaders know how to make a connection.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he rose from the dinner table, took a towel and basin and washed the disciples' feet. When He had finished He returned to His place and asked, *"Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done."*

Loving puts us on our knees
Serving as though we are slaves.
This is the way we should live with you
Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love
Show us how to serve
The neighbors we have from you.

SERVANTHOOD IS A NEW WAY OF ACTING

Jesus said, *"I am among you as one who serves."* Some service is rendered in secret. Richard Foster says, "The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for recognition. It will devise subtle religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. Resist the flesh." It is best for the right hand to not know what the left hand is doing. If it is important to pray in secret, it is likewise urgent to serve in secret.

Some service is rendered in small things like active helpfulness, simple assistance in trifling matters. When I pastored a church in the heart of the city, our front steps would often be covered with whiskey bottles on Sunday morning. I made a habit of carrying them into the church and discarding them in my trash can. The habit created quite a stir since members have a way of knowing what pastors place in their trash cans. The discussions didn't alter my practice, however. It was one small way I could help on Sunday morning.

Some service is rendered in being served. Peter protests against Jesus washing his feet. But Jesus said, *"Unless I wash you, you have no part of me."* It is always easier to give than to receive. But we are not fully qualified to give unless we have received. Receiving cleanses us from the patronizing of giving. When we give as we have received, we discover a common bond between giver and receiver. We are not qualified until we have learned to receive.

Some service is rendered in common courtesy. Titus 3:2 says, *"Be gentle and show perfect courtesy to all men."* At a conference held at St. Simons, Jim Rush, the director of the center, reminded us that the people behind the lunch counters are people too. Treat them respectfully when they ask for your order. The grounds people have families and are trying to make a living. They would appreciate your being courteous. We serve by the way we treat the people at the checkout counter and the custodians who clean where we work and the people in the maintenance department and in our daily circle of contacts. A kind hello would be helpful. Why is it necessary to remind us of this? When have I engaged the personnel in this place in any personal way? He is talking to me. We have thank-you notes to write, acknowledgements to make,

affirmations to extend.

Some service is rendered in altered life styles. Henri Nouwen was a tenured professor at Yale University when he wrote "I felt I needed something else because my spiritual life was not deep. I'm just a fragile person and I knew I wasn't rooted deeply enough in Christ. I wanted something more." So Henri moved to a small community in Richmond Hill, Ontario and became a pastor to a group of mentally disabled kids. Many people thought Henri had lost his mind. Instead, Henri found his soul. In becoming a servant there was satisfaction and peace.

In conclusion, St. Ignatius of Loyola gave us this prayer:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve as you deserve
To give, and not to count the cost
To fight, and not to heed the wounds
To toil, and not to seek for rest
To labor, and not to ask for any reward
Save that of knowing that we do your will.

Remember, we never stand taller than when we stoop to serve.

Amen.

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