

## SERVANT LEADERS – AN OXYMORON FAITH

## Mark 10:35-45

This morning I am going to start my sermon a little differently. I need five or six volunteers. I got this idea from one of the resources I use for sermon preparation. We will see if it works at Marquis. All right, as many of us here can remember from the Price is Right... Come On Down!!

Now, I would like you to join hands and form a circle. Good job. Now, is this the only kind of circle you can make? How can you make this circle different? The account I read this week went like this. The first circle the people made was your traditional classic group facing inward. When challenged to make the circle "different," the circle-formers decided that "getting closer" was the only way they could form a different circle. Each time the pastor asked if they could form a different circle, the circle makers moved closer together until they stood shoulder to shoulder requiring them to let go of hands and put their arms around each other. They finally squashed themselves into a kind of football-type huddle. Finally, they were urged one last time to make still another different circle, someone from the audience helped these poor crushed circle-makers out. "Why don't you turn around?" the voice from outside the circle shouted. "Face out, instead of facing in." With that bit of help, suddenly a whole new kind of circle becomes possible. Let's form this kind of circle. Now you are all looking outward. What if you were to stand sideways to the center of the circle? Your vision then looks both ways. You can see the person in front of you, but you can also see other members of the circle across from them, as well as having a clear view of people outside the circle. This is a movement circle, a group of people poised to go somewhere together, with the ability to look in and look out at the same time. Now you are able to look forward without losing your view of how you got where you are today, because everything that has happened before today has helped shape and form you as the Body of Christ. Let's call this a "looking out" rather than "looking in" circle. Why is this such a strange, radical idea for so many of us? From the time we are little children we are taught that circles face in. Our inability to even conceive of a different kind of circle should help us to sympathize with the disciple's cluelessness as Jesus tries to communicate a new concept of discipleship to his followers. We may find James' and John's questions about heavenly seating arrangements absurdly naive and outrageously ignorant, but these disciples were actually just caught up in making the same old circle.

The traditional Jewish messiah was to arrive on that last day in glory and power, judging all and ruling all. Those who had remained loyal and righteous in the eyes of the messiah expected to receive honorable recognition for their stalwart, sterling behavior. A great and powerful messiah surrounded by his great, distinguished disciples was the vision James and John had nurtured all their lives – it was the expected way things would proceed. Jesus' message – of servanthood, suffering, even slavery and death for the sake of others – was a very different "circle" for the disciples to try to wrap their minds around. Jesus preached that it was only through saving others, focusing on the powerless, the hopeless, and the insignificant, that a disciple could be called "great." A truly great disciple, like Jesus himself, would willingly suffer persecutions, expect deceits and disloyalty, and know death might be the only reward for all his or her sacrifices. No wonder the disciples only wanted to form circles that just faced inward. Facing outward put a discipleship of service for others face-to-face with the frightening possibilities of rejection, abuse, failure, even death. But facing out was the discipleship Jesus preached. Jesus taught that to give up your life is to save it; that the first shall be last and the last first.

Jesus did not teach upward mobility. Jesus taught outward mobility. In fact, Jesus warned about the downward slope of upward mobility. The church is not in this world to serve and save itself. There are far too many churches/congregations whose only goal is to survive, to keep safe, and to form circles that look in. The church (especially the mainline/old-line church) has become much too fixated on how to save itself rather than saving the world. The community of faith, the circle of believing disciples, must face the world with its message. The difference between an inward-circle faith and an outward-circle faith is the difference between "Churchianity" and "Christianity." (Homiletics Online, 1994)

In this text, Jesus really emphasizes ministry which is characterized by serving – serving one another, serving the surrounding community and the world. Poor James and John, these “sons of thunder,” have really caught a lot of flak and ridicule down through the ages of Christianity because of their complete misunderstanding of Jesus as a political Messiah, who would save them from the Romans, rather than a Messiah who came to save them from themselves.

One of my fondest memories of ministry was in my first appointment. I was working on my papers for ordination and the worship portion included, planning, writing and presenting a Bible study based on the book of Acts. I was in my fifth year of working with an after-school Bible club which met every Wednesday afternoon. The participants were from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade so I had to come up with a study that would apply to this large range of ages. I settled on the idea of Servant Leaders in the Book of Acts. Each week we looked at a different Servant Leader in Acts, learning what they did in the Kingdom of God as both servants and leaders. The children had “homework” to do in that they were given choices of how to be a servant in their homes and at school. Each week they would return and share the experience. They were instructed not to share why they were learning to serve, but as you can imagine, the results at both home and school were very positive. On the home front, as the child voluntarily accomplished a task without being asked: taking out the trash, doing dishes, cleaning up their room, setting the table for supper... their parents responded both with praise and increased freedom to make choices. In their schools, teachers noted the students taking on greater responsibility all throughout the school and began to groom the students for leadership positions. To celebrate their accomplishment, each student was given an apron to decorate with handcrafted iron on “badges.” The more tasks the student accomplished, the more badges on their aprons. I was training up the future leaders of the church in a way that was fun for them and filled with a tremendous sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction. If you had to paint a picture of Servant Leaders – what would you include? What do servant-leaders look like? Here are some worthwhile suggestions:

Servant Leaders are people who embrace both the concept of serving others and serving someone greater and beyond themselves. In a spiritual community, no leader gets privilege. With the possible exception of pastors at church potlucks, no leader gets an EZ-Pass; no leader cuts the line; no leader gets in first or takes the best seat. (Vern and I firmly believe this applies to the Pastor and Pastor’s Spouse as well!) Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be a servant to all the rest. A true spiritual leader serves first, and by serving leads ... through example. They are people who understand the importance of awareness, listening, empathy and building community. They understand that it isn’t about me; it’s about you. Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990), considered to be the grandfather of new paradigm thinking and the man who coined the phrase “servant leadership” in a small essay in 1970, continued to teach even in his death. On his

tombstone are the words: “Potentially a good plumber ruined by a sophisticated education.” If you’re called to serve by plumbing, then plumb. Servant Leaders are people who understand what it means to be last. And if that means that someone else was empowered to be first, they have their reward. They are people who do not use people to get the work done but use work to help people grow. Being a servant isn’t easy, but it is necessary — it is absolutely essential. Look at me, says Jesus, I didn’t come to lead, I came to serve. I serve God. I serve you by ransoming my life for your sake. I’m your best example, and my secret is service. Ironically, the church’s I have served are filled with Servants who have great leadership skills but lack the desire to lead. Interestingly, though, the necessary work does get done; leaders still lead, albeit without a “title.” Isn’t that the desired result? It is, at least, until Charge Conference comes along and I have to fill out the necessary reports!!

Oseola McCarty spent a lifetime making other people look nice. Day after day, for most of her 87 years, she took in bundles of dirty clothes and made them clean and neat for parties she never attended, weddings to which she was never invited, graduations she never saw. She had quit school in the sixth grade to go to work, never married, never had children and never learned to drive because there was never any place in particular she wanted to go. All she ever had was the work, which she saw as a blessing. Too many other black people in rural Mississippi did not have even that. She spent almost nothing, living in her old family home, cutting the toes out of shoes if they did not fit right and binding her ragged Bible with Scotch tape to keep Corinthians from falling out. Over the decades, her pay -- mostly dollar bills and change -- grew to more than \$150,000. "More than I could ever use," Miss McCarty said the other day without a trace of self-pity. So, she is giving her money away, to finance scholarships for black students at the University of Southern Mississippi here in her hometown, where tuition is \$2,400 a year. "I wanted to share my wealth with the children," said Miss McCarty, whose only real regret is that she never went back to school. "I never minded work, but I was always so busy, busy. Maybe I can make it so the children don't have to work like I did." Would you say Osceola McCarty is a servant leader?

In our world today, leaders are those in control and power, those who are often at the top of the wage scale. Some of these people are what we call “self-made” men and women; many more inherited their sizable bank accounts. Perhaps with the exception of Jimmy Carter, I would not characterize today’s public figures as servant leaders. The fact that Jesus not only calls James and John to a lifetime of service and sacrifice was just as much of a shock to them as it would be today. Using the words ‘servant’ and ‘leader’ to describe a life of discipleship is somewhat of an oxymoron, hence the title of this morning’s message. However, this is exactly what Jesus is telling his disciples in today’s text and 2000+ years later. It was a lesson that our own John Wesley needed to learn.

John Wesley knew grinding poverty as a child. His father, Samuel Wesley, was the Anglican priest in one of England's lowest-paying parishes. He had nine children to support and was rarely out of debt. Once John saw his father being marched off to debtors' prison. So, when John followed his father into the ministry, he had no illusions about financial rewards. It probably came as a surprise to John Wesley that while God had called him to follow his father's vocation, he had not also called him to be poor like his father. Instead of being a parish priest, John felt God's direction to teach at Oxford University. There he was elected a fellow of Lincoln College, and his financial status changed dramatically. His position usually paid him at least thirty pounds a year, more than enough money for a single man to live on. John seems to have enjoyed his

relative prosperity. He spent his money on playing cards, tobacco, and brandy. While at Oxford, an incident changed his perspective on money. He had just finished paying for some pictures for his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. It was a cold winter day, and he noticed that she had nothing to protect her except a thin linen gown. He reached into his pocket to give her some money to buy a coat but found he had too little left. Immediately the thought struck him that the Lord was not pleased with the way he had spent his money. Perhaps as a result of this incident, in 1731 Wesley began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor. He records that one year his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, so he had 2 pounds to give away. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. In the third year, his income jumped to 90 pounds. Instead of letting his expenses rise with his income, he kept them to 28 pounds and gave away 62 pounds. In the fourth year, he received 120 pounds. As before, his expenses were 28 pounds, so his giving rose to 92 pounds. Wesley felt that the Christian should not merely tithe but give away all extra income once the family and creditors were taken care of. He believed that with increasing income, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving. This practice, begun at Oxford, continued throughout his life.

In closing, I invite you to join me in saying John Wesley's Covenant Prayer. Trust me when I say it is not for the faint of heart, but then again, neither is being a true follower of Jesus Christ.

I am no longer my own, but yours.  
Put me to what you will,  
rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed by you,  
or laid aside by you,  
exalted by you or brought low by you.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours.  
So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
Let it be ratified in heaven.

And all God's people said...AMEN!