

“Freedom and Servanthood”

Mark 10.35–45

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 18 October 2009

“We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” It sounds like something a bunch of demanding little kids would say to a parent before they understood who was in charge. (And it also sounds like the prayers that we sometimes hear from televangelists preaching the so-called prosperity gospel. Some of these guys clearly never heard Janis Joplin sing, “O Lord, Won’t You Buy Me a Mercedes-Benz”)

Two of the disciples, James and John, ask for positions of status – status that relates both to their social ladder and to their sense of salvation. They want to be the leaders of the pack, but they have no clue what that entails.

The society in which Jesus and the disciples lived was quite different from our own in that it was highly stratified, with a tiny ruling elite and an immense class of landless laborers and peasants. There was no middle class. And it’s important to know that when we hear how tough Jesus is on the Gentiles.

Jesus replies to James’s and John’s request for status by saying, “You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” In Jesus’ world, there was a huge gulf between the ruling class (and their minions) and the poor, and the former exploited their positions of power as a matter of course. That was the “normal” way the culture operated.

Unlike first century Judeans, the vast majority of folks here this morning are solidly middle class: we know where our next meal is coming from and we have a roof over our heads. Some of us have lost our jobs, and that does threaten our material security. But the other components of being middle class: education, social connection, and some assets are likely still available to us.

So, assuming that we are somewhere along the middle-class continuum, what does it take for us to do some voluntary downshifting, to willingly relinquish some of our economic privilege? What does it take for us to invest some of our time serving others, whether it’s tutoring kids or serving a meal at the Mission or gleaning at Grant Farm or working for healthcare reform? Investing our time is kind of a tall order for most of us.

When Jesus tells his followers, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave to all,” it’s difficult for us to hear. In part it’s difficult because of the word, “slave,” and the legacy of African-American slavery in this country. And it’s also difficult because Jesus is asking us to make a choice to sacrifice our own comfort and serve others. The word “servant” seems more acceptable and less harsh to our ears.

The idea of servanthood has gotten a lot of play in recent years both in industry and here at Plymouth, and with good reason. When we adopt the role of servant, we do it to follow Christ’s example of selfless service to others. It’s kind of interesting that my role at Plymouth is senior minister, and “*minister*” is the Latin word for “servant.” And while ordained ministers have a distinctive role and responsibility in the life of the church, all of us are called to be ministers – servants – to one another. In fact, we also have deacons, and the Greek word “*diakonos*” means servant. So, servanthood is all around us in our church tradition.

Freedom to choose is an essential component of following Christ. Servanthood is not something that can be legislated or coerced – it must be taken on voluntarily. That is one of the things that makes it so powerful: that we must make a *free choice* to act in the service of God and others.

A generation ago in the UCC we talked about “Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship,” and that sense of freedom is central to who we are in the United Church and here at Plymouth.

We have the freedom to interpret biblical truths and theological understandings for ourselves. But, that freedom comes with much responsibility. It takes a lot of intentionality to spend time discerning what it is we believe and how we put our faith into action.



Twenty years ago, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin wall fell, ushering in a new era of freedom in Europe. It was an iconic event in the history of the twentieth century, one that symbolized openness and freedom.

What are the walls within our culture that keep us from choosing the path of servanthood? What are the walls that you find confining you from becoming more involved in a life of service? Are there some barriers you can topple that might be keeping you from your ministry? Are we walled in like James and John, wanting to have power and prestige, social and economic influence? Are we chasing power seeking to be served rather than to serve?

One of the implicit messages that Jesus reveals in this passage is that humility – seeing ourselves as God sees us – is central to servanthood. Humility isn't so popular these days, especially in the era of shouting congressmen on the floor of the House, astronomical bonuses for financial industry executives, and sports pages awash with the celebrity *athlete du jour*. Humility in our culture is terribly underrated.

The time I spent at Iona Abbey in Scotland was marked by service. **Everyone** participates in the life of the community through service: cleaning toilets, scrubbing floors, preparing meals. And that kind of selfless service is central to the experience of living in community. And just as is true of every community and every church, some people do more and others contribute less. But the more we offer of ourselves – the deeper and more costly our servanthood – the more we wind up deriving from the experience.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. Keeping a pew warm on Sunday morning may be a good starting point, but vital, living Christianity means seven-day-a-week faith. How do you live out your faith in what you do? How does your faith affect your parenting? Your work life? You volunteer time? You friendships and professional relationships? It's all connected if we approach our lives not just as Sunday-morning Christians, but as fulltime servants.

It is something of a paradox that we can experience liberation when we follow the path of servanthood. Only when we release our attachments to power, status, and wealth can we find the freedom that Christ offers.

In closing, I share with you the prayer of St. Francis, which echoes the paradox of Christian freedom and service:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen