

**“Called as Servants”**

**Mark 10.35–45**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 19 October 2003**

Can you imagine the reactions of the disciples when Jesus said, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all”? I can see them scratching their heads, exchanging quizzical looks with one another, and saying, “huh?”

Jesus again uses paradoxical, counterintuitive ideas to describe how the kingdom of God works, though he doesn't mention the kingdom by name. It's the same paradox he uses when he says, “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first,” which you heard in last week's scripture reading.

Could you ever imagine the President or any world leader seeing themselves this way? It's just not the way that power and authority typically work.

This is not merely egalitarianism, it subverts the paradigm of power dynamics – the org. chart is turned upside down; the leader becomes the servant. Yet, that is what gives the servant-leader power and authority.

In the hymn from Philippians that we used as our Call to Worship this morning,<sup>1</sup> we hear that Jesus took “on the form of a slave,” “humbled himself,” and “became obedient.” It was no accident that this is who God chose as the Christ. And it's no coincidence that Jesus calls his disciples to a life of service.

In John's gospel, Jesus goes so far as to wash the feet of his disciples, which is something that a low-level slave in a wealthy household might do for dinner guests as they arrive. This is the kind of extravagant hospitality I spoke of last week. Imagine that you're walking around in sandals with no socks, it's very dusty (there are no paved roads, except those rocky Roman ones), and there is plenty of animal waste en route, and you never know who has athlete's foot. So, this isn't necessarily a pleasant task for Jesus to undertake. I've never been a member of a church that observes the ritual of foot washing, but there is an order for it in our UCC worship book, so maybe we'll try that on Maundy Thursday some year. Though our feet are substantially cleaner than the disciples', it may give us a real sense of servanthood – which is where Jesus is calling us.

Jesus asks his followers, who are jockeying for the position of honor, to change their tactics. We are called to be **downwardly** mobile in order **ultimately** to be upwardly mobile.



So, how does this servant ministry play out in the church today?

I'd like to talk about that in two parts: both ordained ministry and the ministry of the laity. If I were a priest, rather than a minister, I'd function as a bridge between you and God. (The Latin word “pontifex” or “priest” literally means bridge-builder.) While I do perceive my role as a bridge-builder of sorts, I affirm deeply the Reformation notions of direct access to God by any of us, as well as the priesthood of all believers. This puts a lot of responsibility on your shoulders.

In the United Church of Christ, we call our ordained leaders one of two things. (You may call me other names as well, but we can talk about that later.)

“Pastor,” literally means “shepherd” in Latin. (I knew I took Latin in high school and college for a reason!) When we ordain women and men in the UCC, we ordain them as “pastor and teacher.” The notion of “pastor” is very strong on the German Evangelical

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 2.5–9

and Reformed tradition of the church, perhaps for linguistic reasons, but it's also used sometimes in the Congregational side of the UCC family.

So, here's a question: if I'm a shepherd, what does that make you? Sheep! And if you've spent anytime at all around sheep, you know that they are not the smartest animals on the planet. So, the sheep metaphor doesn't fit quite so well here at Plymouth. You're a very talented, un-sheeplike flock!

"Minister," the other name we give to ordained leaders in the UCC, and my official designation here at Plymouth, means what in Latin? Any guesses? Servant!

This name fits the way I sense deeply my call to ordained ministry – as servant leadership, rather than whacking you on the side of the head with a shepherd's crook. (Those of you from Roman Catholic and Episcopal backgrounds know that bishops still carry a rather ornate shepherd's crook as one of the symbols of their office.)

The way I perceive ministry represents something of a shift in ministerial leadership styles here at Plymouth. In both the German Congregational and the German Evangelical and Reformed traditions, tremendous authority was vested in "Herr Pastor." Many times what the pastor said was the final word. So, I'd imagine that some of you experience this as a bit of a departure from former settled pastors, though similar to Rick Riddoch's ministry. (This isn't about right or wrong; it's just a different orientation to ministry.)

And there is still deep authority in the office of minister, but the authority derives from the power of spiritual authenticity, the power to lead by example, the power of respect, and the power of servant leadership. Let's be clear, though, about primarily whose servant I am: God's! Yes, we are all called to be God's servants, and we are called to be servant to one another, but the minister isn't the congregation's "hired help."

In my former life, I did a lot of communications work for the Quality Management group at Apple Computer, and the first question one asks in quality management is "who is my customer?" Well, I ask myself that question in ministry, too. While you all are my "customers," I have to keep remembering that God is our primary "customer."

The role of the ordained minister involves a wonderfully diverse array of roles: spiritual leader, encourager, empowerer of **your** ministries, coach, champion, evangelist, worship leader, resident theologian, counselor, keeper of tradition and change agent as well. Ministerial authority is something I have to earn every day.

I take this role and this privilege very seriously; it's a sacred covenant that binds us together. There are few professions that afford the privilege of sharing the last moments of a person's life, the union of a couple, the welcoming of new life into community, trust with intimate confidences, the leadership of spiritual lives of individuals and a community.

And because we, as a congregation, take this role seriously, it is likely that the Strategic Planning Team will soon recommend to the Church Council that we call a full-time settled associate minister sometime in 2004. Calling another ordained minister will extend the ministry of congregational life and caring here at Plymouth (which is essential as we grow numerically and spiritually). You'll hear more about this before our Annual Meeting in January, and that decision will be up to you to discern, with God's help. And it's going to take an increased financial commitment from our members and friends to make it happen.



The shift in ministry here at Plymouth represents a major cultural change for this congregation, and I want to acknowledge that it may not be easy for all of us. Sometimes it's not comfortable for me, either, but I believe that it's where we're called as a

congregation. This cultural shift in ministerial relationships also necessitates some changes in the way we communicate and handle conflict. I am a firm believer in direct communication – if you have something to say to someone, you say it directly to them. We don't complain to our friends about a church issue (whether it's a leaky plumbing fixture or a point of theological contention); we go to a trustee and point out the problem, or you come to me and say that you disagree a point I made in a sermon (which is okay!). It's what Paul called "speaking the truth in love." I try to model this type of communication and have created opportunities for your input through Monday morning sermon talk-back and in asking all members to evaluate my performance, and you're always welcome to schedule time with me.

Again, this is shifting responsibility onto your shoulders, as well. And it's part of your **ministry** as members of this church. And lay ministry has deep roots in Congregationalism. It is no accident that most of the time, communion is served to you both an ordained minister and a lay deacon. (By the way, the Greek word Mark uses for "servant" is "diakonos," from which we derive the English word, "deacon.") The ministry of the laity has been a part of the Congregational tradition from its very inception, and our democratic roots are amazingly deep. (The 1639 Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, the first written constitution that ever created a government, were written by the members of Congregational churches in Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield, and the Rev. Thomas Hooker of Hartford preached these words at the opening session: "the foundation of authority is laid in free consent of the people.") It's why we are called Congregational (governed by the congregation), rather than Episcopal (governed by a bishop) or Presbyterian (governed by elders). This is a church of Jesus Christ, but it is entrusted to you to run, to nourish, and to grow.

So, how do you perceive your call to ministry? That might seem like a surprising question to some of you. We, each of us, have a vocation, a calling, to serve, and it comes in infinite forms: checking in on an elderly neighbor, helping coordinate church directory photos, listening deeply to your child, acting for justice, helping with coffee hour, going on a mission trip. What is it that lights a fire in you? What service makes you feel alive?

I have a very strong belief in the ministry of the laity, which is reinforced by my own powerful, positive experiences in lay ministry before I went to seminary. At First Congregational UCC in Boulder, I was part of the Caring Ministry program, which had evolved from the Stephen Ministry program, which you may be familiar with. I was paired as a lay Caring Minister with a wonderful elderly man, named Roy Brammell, who had been the founding dean of the School of Education at the University of Connecticut. He was in his mid-90s and had lost his wife to cancer, and it was my privilege to spend some time with him twice a month, to talk, to pray, and part of that privilege was being invited into the Brammell family. Roy died while I was still paired with him, and his was the first memorial service I helped to lead. I got in touch with something deep inside myself, a need to do service for others. And this relationship with Roy and his family helped me on my path toward seminary. It was a very powerful, life-changing experience for me.

You may know that we're currently augmenting our Visiting Angel program and adding a Calling/Caring Ministry. It's a chance for you to exercise your ministry to others in the congregation. It could be through parish nursing, through visiting a less-mobile member, helping with respite care, or sharing part of a journey with someone experiencing a life transition. (This does not replace pastoral counseling, acute intervention, or visitation – it augments the work of our clergy with **your** ministry.) Three of our deacons (an psychologist, a social worker, and an ordained minister) will be

leading the six training sessions, which begin this Monday. Does this kind of ministry sound interesting to you? This is a great opportunity to learn and expand the way you look at servanthood and to expand your faith.

So, how are you called to ministry? No two of us are quite the same in our vocation, so I'd invite you to look at where your passion matches up with the greatest need, and then to go for it!

In closing, I'll leave you with these words from Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now."

Amen.