

**“Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant?”**

**Philippians 2.1–11**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 25 September 2005**

When I’m getting ready for a service and I’m robing up in my office, I start with a prayer as I put on my stole: “Let me speak a word of truth to your people, O Lord.” And as I tie the cincture around my waist, I pray: “Bind me, O God, into your service.”

Those two prayers remind me of why I’m here: to serve as minister and teacher.

We earlier sang one of my favorite hymns, “Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant?” We sang it when I was ordained, and we sang it here at Plymouth three years ago when I was installed as your senior minister. (I want you to take note that Sharon and I both prefer to be called *minister*, rather than *pastor*, and I’ll say more about that later.)



This morning’s text, in which Paul and Timothy are writing to the church in Philippi, includes something unique: it is the earliest hymn of the church, and like the hymn I just mentioned, its theme servanthood. Now, you’ll note that the NRSV text says that Jesus “took the form of a slave.” The Greek word in this epistle is *doulos*, which means either slave or servant. (We actually have the female of this noun in English. A person hired to help a woman through labor and delivery is called a *doula*.) So Jesus is takes the form of a *doulos*. And for \$64,000, do you know the Latin word for servant (not *servus*)? It’s *minister*. So, while *pastor* means *shepherd*, *minister* means *servant*. And that probably explains why Sharon and I both prefer to be called *ministers*, although we were both ordained as “pastor and teacher.”

Enough with etymology. This early hymn that describes Jesus as taking the form of a slave or servant has linkages to one of the Hebrew prophets whom Christians refer to often in seeking the roots of the messianic tradition associated with Jesus, namely Isaiah. And in the third part of Isaiah, we read about “the suffering servant,” which Christians often identify as a prophecy about Jesus. Listen for similarities about servanthood and what we know of the life of Jesus:

52.13 See, my servant shall prosper;  
he shall be exalted and lifted up,  
and shall be very high.

14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him †  
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of mortals—

15 so he shall startle many nations;  
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;  
for that which had not been told them they shall see,  
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

53 Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

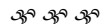
3 He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

If you were a Jewish Christian, like James or Peter or Paul, and you were attempting to introduce other Jews to the idea that Jesus was the messiah, what better way than to use the Hebrew Bible to explain that he was prophesied by Isaiah and prophets. While I claim that Jesus was the messiah for whom the Hebrew people were waiting, I also see that a lot of Christian scripture is “prophesy historicized,” rather than “history prophesied,” as John Dominic Crossan puts it.

And still...the message is there in one of the earliest texts we have from the Christian movement. Unlike the earliest gospel, According to Mark, dated to the year 70, this was written within 22 to 29 years following Jesus’ death. And it’s right there: the message is about servanthood.



Service tends to be our inclination, both as a congregation and as a denomination...I think it’s in our United Church DNA.

For most of us, it is far easier to offer service than it is to accept it. In my pastoral counseling classes in seminary, we were taught about “the grace to receive.” So, when we’re on a pastoral call, having the grace to accept a glass of iced tea is an important way to “let you be my servant too,” as the hymn says. (*Just please don’t offer me and Sharon cookies or cake.*)

Recently, I learned that one member of a couple in our congregation will be having surgery. Now, you have to understand that these folks always (and I mean always) show up to help other folks; they aren’t used to being on the receiving end of your ministry at Plymouth. So, I wrote them an email saying that members at Plymouth will want to help in any way they can. And in characteristic form, they accepted gracefully. So, we all need to have the grace to receive service as well as to provide it.

We do amazing things together here at Plymouth. Take a look at our outreach and our “inreach” as a faith community in Fort Collins. Part of humility is not blowing your own horn, so I’m going to use my privileged position to blow your horn for you. Our mission and outreach includes the Homelessness Prevention Initiative (which you’ll hear about more next Sunday), generous disaster response (over \$6,000 for Katrina relief so far), the annual Navajo mission trip to Shiprock (that happened last weekend), generous giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission that has an impact as near as United Campus Ministries at CSU and as far as AIDS education and prevention in South Africa.

“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others,” Paul writes. It is judiciously putting your own interests behind those of others that makes servant ministry happen: *turning what you do into new possibilities for others*. And still, there is more to do, and together we can do it.

Our “inreach” – inviting into our facilities more than 30 nonprofit organizations and government programs who need a place to meet– is also power in transforming lives, which is what our service is all about.

Here are just a few examples. One Saturday every month, the Restore program of the Probation Department and the District Attorney’s Office uses the entire north wing and the fellowship hall in a restorative justice program for teen shoplifters that brings the offender together with the victim to work out a way to restore the victim’s loss and the offender’s self-esteem. (The recidivism rate drops dramatically with this program.) *Isn’t it great that they are associated with Plymouth?*

Every Friday morning, the Poudre School District’s Early Childhood Screening program (which was developed by our own Lorrie Wagner) uses the north wing and the fellowship hall to do vision, hearing, and developmental screenings for preschoolers. By identifying children who might need additional support, the program helps remove

roadblocks for kids so that they can succeed as learners and as persons. *Aren't you proud that you have provided the space for this to happen in our church?*

PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meets here monthly. Their mission is to help remove the stigma that our society has placed on people who aren't straight. I don't know if this was true at Plymouth back when you were voting on the Open and Affirming resolution, but in most churches parents with gay, lesbian, and bisexual kids tend to be some of the most effective advocates for opening the doors wide. PFLAG is also a place where GLBT folks can find acceptance and support. Isn't it great that this happens in our church?

Like Plymouth, Congregation Har Shalom uses inclusive language for God and is "open and affirming" of GLBT folks. And like Plymouth, they are growing fast. In fact, their facility on Drake Road is too small to hold everyone for their high holiday services. (We have over 700 people worship on Christmas eve... imagine if we had to have them all at one service, not three!) So, they approached me to ask if Plymouth might be willing to let them use our sanctuary, fellowship hall, and some classrooms for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur observations next month. And our deacons and church council agreed that this was a great way to build bridges with our brothers and sisters. *Aren't you pleased that they knew they could ask Plymouth and feel welcomed here?*

This "inreach" isn't simple charity (which makes us feel better and puts a band-aid on another's wound) it's supporting people who are making systemic change possible. They are making a difference, and **you** are making a difference.

Our "inreach" and outreach ministries at Plymouth are made possible by two types of service you provide: First, your own ideas and your openness to others about how to reach people and transform lives. Second, you have invested in Plymouth to make a difference.

You all deserve a pat on the back, so, I'd like you to take a moment and pat the back of the person next to you, because you are helping to make this possible.

It is your servant ministry that makes this happen: turning what you do into new possibilities for others. And still, there is more to do, and together we can do it.



As I said earlier, Sharon and I have the (sometimes subtle) distinction of being *ordained* ministers, set apart for presiding over the sacramental life of the church, as well as the spiritual leadership and coaching *with* you. At our baptism, we all of us become servants of Christ. (And it's important to remember that while we are called to serve each other that ordained ministers are servants of God...not the congregation. So, sometimes you might hear us say unpopular things from the pulpit; it's not our job to be popular, but rather to listen and lead.)

So, what is your ministry? Do you serve on the Church Council? Deliver bread to visitors? Participate in the Calling/Caring Ministry? Help out at the Mission? Teach Sunday School? Provide financial support for our mission and ministry? Give someone a ride to a doctor's appointment? Extend a welcome to someone here in our midst? Operate the dishwasher? The ministries at Plymouth are limitless, but it takes an idea and openness, time and effort, and yes, even money, to make a ministry vital. I'm impressed by what I observe happening here, and I want you to know that.

At the beginning of his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes these words, which I want to extend to you as well:

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him...so that you are

not lacking in any spiritual gift.” May we continue to use our gifts in the service of God and others.

Amen.