

Sermon October 19, 2003  
“Service not Consumption”  
Mark 10: 35-45

Let us pray. O God, You are behind me and before me. Lay your hands upon me as I utter these words and may we all feel your presence in our souls. Amen

I want you to imagine two senior political operatives; a woman named Jamie and a man named John. They are working for a presidential candidate who we shall call Howard. You are free in your imagination to use a different name for the candidate, such as John, Joe or even George. Our two senior operatives have for more than a year walked with their candidate the seemingly endless back lanes of New Hampshire and attended with him political caucuses in more granges in Iowa than they ever knew existed. They were there when the candidate got his party’s nomination and through the final grueling days of the campaign. It is now November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 and the final polls are out. Howard has a commanding -- indeed a double-digit -- lead. Our two campaign coordinators find the right moment when the candidate is alone and ask him for a favor. They want two prime, highly prized positions in the new administration: White House Chief of Staff and Presidential Press Secretary. They have raised this issue when he is alone for they do not want their fellow operatives to hear the request.

I will let you speculate what the response of our hypothetical candidate is to this request. Perhaps it is – “yes, you can have these positions” or perhaps the response is “its too early for me to make those decisions but rest assured you won’t be forgotten. I need you in the new administration.” My vote is for the later response; for a good politician always puts off a decision until he must finally make it -- for the winds of circumstance and politics may change. And by the way he may be thinking how do I know Jamie and John will pass their FBI background checks.

Far fetched perhaps. But we all know that in many spheres in our world-- not just politics but business, academia, even the church -- such requests and discussions go on. Most of us have been in situations --I certainly have-- when we expected to be cut in on “the action”, to get our reward, to be put in a position where we are served and do not have to serve. And, of course, that is in a real sense what James and John seek in our passage from Mark. They go to Jesus when the other disciples are not around and ask for the preferred positions of authority next to Jesus. The other disciples act in this situation just as we would expect; they are upset and angry because each in his heart thinks the position at Jesus’ right or left hand should be for them. Interestingly, Jesus does not rebuke James and John or the other disciples even though by their request and actions they have revealed that they have missed the fundamental point of Jesus’ life and what it means to believe in and to follow the Son of God. My guess is that there is no rebuke because learning this lesson concerning the nature of discipleship is of fundamental importance to the disciples for to truly follow Jesus will be difficult and costly for them.

James and John missed the point concerning a life following Jesus in two fundamental respects. First, they did not understand what is expected of a disciple and follower. How were they to live? What was demanded of them? And second they underestimated the cost of such a life of discipleship. Interestingly, this narrative follows immediately in Mark after a passage in which Jesus tells the disciples yet again in detail what is going to happen to him. Namely, he

will be handed over to the authorities, they will mock him, flog him and kill him and after three days he will rise again. (Mark 10: 32-34). There is no mention of a Davidic Kingdom of political power for Jesus waiting for him but rather death and resurrection. This chronological sequence of passages probably bears no relation to events in Jesus life nor can we be certain that these events happened as narrated. However, these two passages have been placed together by the author of Mark to highlight the difficulty the early church had in understanding what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Is it any less difficult for us than it was for James and John to truly understand what is expected and to meet those expectations -- those demands --belief makes on us?

James and John wanted to receive something from God. They wanted a reward for their time with Jesus on the back roads of Judea; they wanted positions of authority. Or in Jesus' words as reported by Mark, they wanted to be served not to serve. While in the world at large (in Mark the world among the Gentiles) people may seek power and positions that allow them to Lord it over others, followers of Jesus are required to be servants or in the language of our text "to be slave of all". The term "slave" here is not used to reflect the institution of slavery (though it existed in those days) but rather the term is used to denote that it is service to others in the broadest sense that we are commanded to do. John and James did not want to serve they wanted to be served. They misunderstood the ultimate outcome of Jesus' life. Despite Jesus' statements they clung to the belief that there would be a New Kingdom with a king on a throne with powerful advisers at each hand of the new king. However, it was not power per se which was rejected but the use of power. James and John, indeed none of the disciples apparently fully understood this lesson of service.

Can the same be said of our generation? Periodically, *Parade Magazine* has a cover story that tracks the compensation paid to people in various occupations across this country. I confess I read the article eagerly – in part my eagerness is to see how I stack up and hopefully to feel a sense of satisfaction –when I learn I am doing better than a life insurance agent in Mobile or a lumberjack in Boise. Not very laudatory on my part; I have little doubt that Jesus could use my behavior to craft a parable about envy and covetousness. But I also read the article because the statistics measure the health of our society and culture. Read the story next time its run and look at the salaries paid teachers, nurses, social workers and then look at the salaries or compensation received by CEOs, professional athletes, radio and TV personalities in our society. Certainly, the message about service is clear: it does not pay; we simply do not value it.

Our sense of community has been diminished by the pace of life and by the distances geographic, psychological and social which separate us from each other. As a consequence the face of need no longer bears a name or even a story that we know. In such circumstances the need loses its reality and its imperative. Even when we do acts of service they are often compartmentalized – relegated to the off hours of our lives or to a momentary burst of conscience. Remember the public service announcements the TV stations used to be required to carry for the privilege of using our scarce airways. When were those announcements on the air? Late nights or earlier mornings preferably buried on a Sunday morning when no one watched TV. They were never on during "prime time". The same could often be said for acts of service in our society. At least for me it's when I am not too tired and nothing important or indeed trivial occurs to distract me. Such service I call feel good service --I do it when I feel good or to make me feel good.

Ok. What does it mean to serve not to be served? Jesus has in his life and teaching given us a clear picture. We must expose ourselves to the pain of others; we must decline easy comfort; we must eschew power for power's sake (that is power which is not itself a vehicle to serve); and we must confront evil, oppression and injustice where it is -- even when it is in our own back yard or in the halls of power. These are all hard to do. We all get discouraged by the enormity of the needs to be served and by the reality that we must also provide for ourselves. However, the message of our passage is not that asceticism is required. Rather what I think is at its heart is the great commandment: love of God and love of neighbor. This means we can not place our interests ahead of those of others. We are not to be servants of ourselves or of some select group but of all. Our acts of service must be in the primetime of our lives -- not left to the off hours, such as Sunday mornings. Jesus is talking about what we do when we are tired, and it's inconvenient. The homeless don't need sandwiches when I feel good or can fit in the time to make them or delivery them.

Now the enormity of the needs sometimes puts a damper on our efforts. We can't solve a problem so we never start to. I heard recently a statement attributed to Mother Teresa that I think should encourage us to serve. What God asks is not that we do great acts of service with little love, but that we do little acts with great love. There is in Israel a memorial called in Hebrew Yad Vashem. It is a garden in which trees are planted in memory of the "righteous among the nations". The stories of the righteous are remarkable and poignant. Yet many of these stories involve, not great or daring acts, but small acts done day in and day out --providing information to Jews in hiding or helping a Jewish family to move from one safe house to another. In the late 1830s and early 1840s our congregational forebears formed a committee to provide a defense for a group of slaves who had rebelled and taken over the slave ship La Amistad. A successful defense was mounted, the slaves released ultimately, and money raised to help these slaves back to Sierra Leon --the land from which they had been taken. These acts in a sense were modest -- some fund raising, preparation of some pamphlets and the housing of a few former slaves. Yet they were miraculous acts of service for those 34 slaves who returned home and to freedom. Perhaps equally important the group that formed was to become an important anti slavery group in the struggle against slavery here. Indeed, that committee—that group of ordinary citizens--eventually became the America Missionary Society and a part of the Congregational Church. That group started and supported over 200 colleges, including many of the major predominantly black colleges in America including Howard, Fisk, the Hampton Institute, Talledega, Tugaloo, among others. Think of the service done by those schools and their graduates. The lesson is that small acts done with great love for the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity make a difference. That is what Jesus was telling James and John. Jesus demands that we live not simply in the passive voice of being served but in the active voice of serving others.

Frequently, it seems that the passive voice appears to have taken over. It is true sometimes even in our churches. There is much discussion in religious journals and in the popular media about the decline of church membership in the mainline denominations, including our own. The causes identified are varied depending upon the expert you listen to. What is interesting is that while the causes vary, the proposed cures share a similar characteristic. They all stress that the churches must become more relevant and more attractive. Whether through use of new liturgies, so-called alternative forms of worship, or praise bands in lieu of tradition

Church music, and the list goes on, the common thread is that we must become more attractive. The assumption is that the people in the pews are consumers who move from church to church until they like the message or music or whatever and leave for a new church when the novelty and interest have subsided. Now there is some truth to the need to be interesting and relevant. Just as I would suggest there really is no sound in the forest if there is no one there, there is no sermon if there is no one in the pew to hear it. So yes we must connect. Stated in a different way Christian life does involve the passive; we are indeed called, served and loved by God without regard to merit. But such a life must also embrace the active, as Jesus said to his disciples we must serve and love God and others. The health of the modern church can not alone be measured by membership, attendance and budgets. It must finally be judged by whether the church and those in it are serving the world and making a difference.

James and John also failed to appreciate that there is a cost associated with discipleship. Jesus reminded them that they would have to drink the cup and be baptized with the baptism that he had. In the psalms the reference to the cup meant receipt of woe and sorrow. Likewise, the reference to baptism here probably refers to the death that awaits Jesus. For the followers of Jesus living in the first and second centuries (in the common era), imprisonment and death were real possibilities. Obviously, those are not the costs we likely risk. On the other hand who would have thought that the act of helping a few African-Americans to register to vote would have led to the deaths of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney in Philadelphia Mississippi in 1964. Nonetheless, the costs of service for us are of a lesser magnitude, more prosaic. But there will likely be costs, whether it be nothing more than being tired and unappreciated, or worse perhaps unpopular or ostracized.

Now what about Jamie and John -- must they, in the eyes of the author of Mark, walk away from politics and eschew positions of authority. The answer is no in both cases. But the lesson from Mark is that they as followers of Jesus must in their endeavors remember that it is about service of others not service of self.

I want to end with a poem by Godfrey Fox Bradby that perhaps puts all of this in context:

The Kingdoms of the Earth go by  
In purple and in gold;  
They rise, they triumph, and they die,  
And their entire tale is told

One Kingdom only is divine  
One banner triumphs still,  
Its King a servant, its sign  
A [gallows] on a hill.