

Natalie W. Bell
 October 2, 2022
 World Communion
 4th Mark Vital Church—Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership
Matthew 20:25-28

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.²⁶ It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave,²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus says this to his followers, after the Mother of James and John asks for her sons to sit at Jesus right and left hand in his kingdom!

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before Jesus, she asked a favor of him.²¹ And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”²² But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?²³ They said to him, “We are able.”²³ He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

In the Gospel of Mark the two brothers ask this favor themselves, but here in the ***Gospel of Matthew***, their mother wants them to have these positions of power.

And in some ways their request is ***understandable***—
 I mean they knew that Jesus was the Messiah,
 they assumed that he would establish a kingdom on earth—
 and they wanted to be a part of it.
 They wanted to be ***leaders in the kingdom***,
 a seemingly reasonable request for any of Jesus' disciples.

But it's also a clear call to have ***positions of power*** in Jesus' kingdom.
 So Jesus says
Are you able to drink my cup? And they naively say yes, we're able!

Not realizing that Jesus' kingdom is headed to the cross!
It is a path of suffering, and service, not power and prestige!

Jesus actually says **You WILL drink of my cup....**
knowing that they too would suffer as his disciples.
He tells them, you will be the kind of leaders you don't expect.
And he goes on to say:

the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ *It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷ *and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave,* ²⁸ *just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve....*

How did they **feel hearing** that?
How do we feel hearing these words?

We've likely heard them before—that Jesus came to serve, not be served,
But here Jesus is saying that **WE are called to that same path** of service.
THAT is the kind of leadership we are called to as disciples—**servant leadership.**
Humble leadership.
Not the kind that grabs for power or control over others.
Not the kind that yearns for fame or prestige.

Servant leadership is the 4th Mark of a Vital Church in this sermon series.
And it's the **kind of life** that Jesus encourages.

Which means we are called to a way of life that is **completely foreign** to us.
This is NOT the way our world works, is it?
It's NOT the way we work!
We usually want power, and we want to use it!
We want to be known, and have some prestige,
at least in our little corner of the world.
You could argue that the **foundation of our modern society**—
Is the desire for **power, fame, and money.**

Most of our **politicians** are incredibly rich,
and they often use their power to lord it over others as tyrants.
They relish fame and prestige.
They use innocent people for political gain and notoriety.
They are not in the business of serving others, but of being served.

Most famous ***people, athletes, and celebrities*** are also incredibly rich, and they too use power over others.

They relish fame and prestige.

They demand that their wants and needs be met before others if they are going to perform or play.

They are not in the business of serving others.

They are all about ***being served***.

Sadly, the ***famous, powerful, and rich are who we often admire, and emulate***.

People are frequently caught up in gaining followers on social media because of that desire, to be famous, powerful and rich.

Jesus has a ***totally different way of life*** for us.

The way of the cross.

The way of service, not being served.

Methodist Pastor **Will Willimon** talks about this phenomenon in his sermon “*Good News?*”.

He points out how many messages from the church today

Are about ***Jesus being the answer*** to our every need and desire.

If we need peace or hope—Jesus is the answer.

If we need power or money—Jesus is the answer.

If we need anything at all—Jesus is the answer.

We tell people all the great things that will come from following Jesus, and call it evangelism...but sometimes the things we are advertising are the same things the ***world advertises!***

He mentions a growth consultant his church hired, who said

“The church is here to ***meet people's felt needs***”.

Rev. Dr. Will Willimon, ‘Good News’, Day 1.org, Sunday Oct 18, 2009.

Hmmm. Really?

I doubt that Matthew, Mark, Luke or John would characterize the church that way.

I doubt that the Gospel writers, the early disciples, the followers of Jesus in his day would say that Jesus was all about ***meeting people's felt needs, or what they thought they needed***.

To be sure, Jesus ***did heal and feed people***—
 he did restore people to community
 and meet their physical needs with his miracles and teaching.

But it wasn't ***just about meeting their felt needs***.
 It was about something far more than people ever knew they needed!
 It was about life in the kingdom of God that goes so far beyond
what we feel we need, into the realm of what ***God knows we need***.
 And oftentimes, those two things are NOT the same.
We want security, money, power, health, an easy life.
 We want Jesus to serve us, just as we want others to serve us.

Jesus ***offers something deeper***,
 something far more important and meaningful.
 He calls us to ***serve*** instead of being served.
 To be ***last*** if we want to be first.
 To ***give up power*** over others.
 To ***suffer*** for the sake of following Jesus Christ.

Instead of Jesus as the giver of all things we desire,
 the Jesus of the Gospels is actually a giver
 of things we never thought we would desire.
 Like servanthood.

Isn't this what Paul meant in ***Philippians 2:2-8***,
 when he told us to have the mind of Christ?
*be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one
 mind.* ³ *Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard
 others as better than yourselves.* ⁴ *Let each of you look not to your own interests
 but to the interests of others.* ⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ
 Jesus,*
⁶ *who, though he existed in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be grasped,*
⁷ *but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 assuming human likeness.*
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ *he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

That is the cup that Jesus drinks—it is what James and John and their mother don't yet understand—that his path to glory goes through the ***cross***.
 That his path to power and the kingdom of God is found through humble service and submission, even through suffering itself.

When they say “***we can drink your cup***” ***they are clueless***. But Jesus tells them the truth, “*You will drink my cup....*” Because he knew that they too would suffer for the sake of their faith.

Jesus promises all of us who follow that we will share with him in suffering and challenges, because the way of humble service isn't easy.

We know this deep inside, don't we?
That serving isn't always easy?
 That humility can bring challenges and even pain?

The disciples didn't always understand this, until after the crucifixion and resurrection. They thought that being leaders in the kingdom of God was about power and fame and fortune, When in reality it is all about ***serving and helping*** others.

In reality, following Christ and his way is ***NOT ABOUT US***. It's about those around us. It's about the world around us. It's about ***what God wants for us, not what we want from God***.

Willimon says: “*This is the message that contemporary followers of Jesus have been reluctant to proclaim...Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world redeemed...and the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus*”.

Rev. Dr. Will Willimon, 'Good News', Day 1.org, Sunday Oct 18, 2009.

And walking and talking like Jesus means being *someone who serves, Who goes last, not first.*

Not someone who has power over anyone else.

It means servant leadership, *not being a leader with servants.*

How is our ***CHURCH equipping people to be servant leaders?***

How are we teaching people to humbly serve—wherever they find themselves?

How are we preparing people to suffer for Jesus if needed,
because the way of service isn't easy, it isn't popular,
and it can lead to hard times?

It's so easy for us ***take our faith for granted, isn't it?***

We can worship freely.

Which is not the case for all Christians around the world.

We should remember that on this World Communion Sunday.

Some people suffer for their faith,

Some serve Jesus and others, at great peril.

Willimon talks about participating in
the ***baptism of a Chinese graduate student*** in a local campus ministry—
and he brought his camera to take pictures for the student.

That was the ***wrong move.***

The campus minister explained that his baptism
meant he would likely be cut off from his family,
and probably lose his money for studies in the U.S.!

He didn't need pictures, he needed ***support for his new life in Christ,***
for he was truly following the way of Jesus Christ!

When Willimon was preaching at Duke,
he lamented the low turnout at Chapel services.

Which is when one of the students pointed out that the students at Duke
were likely smart enough to figure out
that giving their lives to Christ ***might make their lives more difficult!***

That's so often true, isn't it?

Following Jesus does ***demand*** something of us—
it's not just about what we want to get from God.

We ***can't treat God like a vending machine.***

God is so much more than that.

And following Jesus is also about ***what God is asking of us.***

Like service.

Does this mean that ***Christianity is all doom and gloom*** and suffering?

Absolutely not.

It means that the joy we find through Jesus
is sometimes accompanied by challenges and suffering---
just like ***anything else worthwhile*** in this life.

Just like how we find ***joy and pain existing alongside*** one another in life,
all the time.

Presbyterian Pastor and author ***Frederick Buechner*** used to say
That our vocation ***is***

where our deepest JOY and the world's deepest NEEDS meet.

In other words, we ***find that joy*** we all seek,
when we are ***serving the needs*** of others.

When we are meeting the needs of those who suffer.

And such a path of course means ***challenges and suffering*** of our own.
But talk about being worth it!

Think about that in your own life---

Isn't it life-changing to serve others?

Of course, serving others first ***does NOT come naturally.***

A servant's heart is not what we're born with.

It is only possible to become a true servant,
if we ***allow the Holy Spirit to work on us.***

The question is, ***will we allow the Spirit to expand our hearts in this way?***

Jesus said that the ***Greatest Commandment*** was to love God,
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

But what if we ***learn this love of self and others,***
Through serving others?

Have you ever found yourself to be ***blessed, while giving*** to someone else?
Isn't service like that?

What if ***true leadership*** and the kind of power that Jesus wants for us

Is ***humility,***

putting others first,

And ***serving*** instead of being served?

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel* today.
We are called to *servant leadership*,
That is the path to true life, and joy in Christ.

May we *allow the Holy Spirit to work* on our hearts,
And make us willing servants.
And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.