

4th Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
A Life of Serving

Matthew 20:17–28 (NIV84)

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” ²² “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

You’ve probably seen the stories about how some people have attempted to use the current corona virus crisis to benefit themselves. They buy up all the hand sanitizer and try to sell it for exorbitant prices. They take all the toilet paper off the shelves and try to sell it online. Others will try to rob stores and businesses since they are closed or operating with only a few people. Most people see this kind of behavior as disgusting behavior. It is clearly sinful to take advantage of a disaster or crisis for your own benefit and to the harm of others. We know what wicked and sinful behavior looks like and that is it!

Are we as good at identifying our own wicked and sinful behavior? Do we not realize that we were born with a sinful nature just as wicked and corrupt as the price gouger and opportunistic thief? Sometimes we overlook our own sin when it is so easy to see the sin of others. Crisis situations often amplify character so that sin is easy to see in some people. We might be good at hiding our sins from others, even in hard times, but God’s Word shows us just how corrupt and sinful we have been and how much we need a Savior to serve us. Today’s Gospel lesson tells us about a Life of Serving. First we see how Jesus gives his life to serve all people. Then we will examine our reasons (bad and good) for serving others in our life.

Jesus Gives His Life to Serve All People

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

Here we have the solution to our sins. Christ crucified and risen. But the disciples don’t yet understand so Jesus tells his disciples exactly what will happen before Palm Sunday in order to prepare the disciples for Jesus’ great acts of service.

They were hoping for great acts of power. Jesus has already been transfigured and Peter, James and John

saw him in his glory as the Son of God. They had witnessed miracles after miracle. The blind received sight, the lame walked and the dead were raised. Jesus was popular with the people, though not with the chief priests and teachers of the law. Passover was coming soon and thousands upon thousands of Jews would be in Jerusalem. Wouldn't this be a perfect time for Jesus to rally his followers and put the Jewish leaders in their place? After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, couldn't he have given the order to overthrow the Jewish and the Roman authorities? Why not take advantage of his power and popularity at that moment to establish his kingdom in Jerusalem?

Because Jesus came to serve all people. As Jesus says at the end of the lesson, "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" All that Jesus does is selfless and by grace. All that he does is for the benefit of others. He suffers at the hands of the chief priests and teachers of the law to serve them by giving his life as a ransom for them. He endures the mockery and pain from the Gentiles, the Romans, to serve them and give his life as a ransom for them. And Christ went to the cross of suffering to pay the ransom price for all sinners, including you and me. He served all people with his life to free all people from the curse of sin and eternal death. Christ's lived and died and rose to serve all people.

The Reasons We Serve

And this is our best and only way to serve others, motivated by Christ's love and service to us. When we see our sins rightly, we humbly thank the Lord and serve him and others gladly in life. Obviously, the mother of James and John did not see things clearly yet. For after Jesus explained how he would serve all people by giving up his life in Jerusalem, this happens.

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered.

James, John and their mother think that there is some reward to be gained at this time. They attempt to ask for this great reward before the other disciples. For Jesus is going to Jerusalem and maybe this will be the time the great kingdom of Israel will be restored. Maybe the two brothers can sit next to Jesus when he establishes this great kingdom. James and John even boldly say they can drink the cup Jesus will drink. Have they been listening? Jesus is going to endure terrible pain and suffering and then he will die in Jerusalem. Are they willing to serve Jesus in any way just for the reward of being his right and left hand men? Looking back on this, we see their arrogance and their poor reason for serving. They want a great reward.

We need to examine our own hearts to see the reason why we serve. It should be out of love and thanks for the Savior who shed his blood for me. But our sinful nature is still in us and corrupts even the best of intentions. Therefore, we might think we deserve some kind of reward for the selfless service we have given to our Savior and to others. The thought may occur to us that we have earned a little good will from God for our years of hard work for our family, service to our congregation, helping our neighbors, and faithfully giving our offerings and to charities. Doesn't my service get me some reward? No. What other reward do we want than has already been given by Christ? He has made you children of God, heirs of eternal life. Lord, help us to root out the sinful motivations we have to serve and serve you with thanks and praise for how you served us.

Another bad reason for serving others is out of a sense of repayment and fairness. Certainly we can thank someone and help them with something if they have served us in some way. But when we think we owe a debt to someone who has served us, we feel guilt until we have repaid them. Then we are only serving them to ease our guilt and not in love. On the other hand, when we serve others, we can fall into

keeping score. “I did the dishes tonight. They better do them tomorrow.” “I covered for them at work when they were sick. They owe me and better help me when they get back.” This only leads to bitterness and resentment when the person does not do as much as you think they should to serve you. As families are spending much more time at home together, we ask our Lord to help us avoid only serving when it is “fair” or “my turn.” And we ask the Lord to forgive us when we serve with a sinful attitude.

That is exactly what Christ does. He never keeps score or keeps a record of our sin. Just think of how long our list would be! But as the author of Psalm 130 wrote, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” The list of our sins is blotted out. There is no list. All is forgiven by the Savior who gave his life as a ransom for many. All is paid by the Savior who went to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again. This is why we fear and love God. This is why we obey his commandments. This is why we serve God and others with our lives. We are forgiven by Christ. His love compels us.

The keyword today is “Serve.” Send that word to me by email, Facebook, you tube comment, text or phone. And send me any other comments too. This will help us keep in touch while we are not able to worship together in church. Thank you.

And think about how we can serve others while we are stuck at home for a while. Give someone a call and actually talk on the phone...or text, email, dm, or whatever form of communication you use now. Send a card. I received a card in the mail this week that made my day. Pray for others, especially when you are not able to directly serve them. The Lord knows what people need and how to provide it. Maybe you have more ways to serve or ways we can serve others as a congregation. Share those with me this week too.

May Christ move us to serve by his forgiving and powerful Word. Jesus says, “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷ *and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—* ²⁸ *just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Amen.