

Acts of Service

Sermon for 21st Sunday after Pentecost | Gospel Text: Mark 10:35-45

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You could say that my favorite hat is ugly. I first started wearing it not long after I opened my restaurant in 1997 and it quickly became my go-to hat anytime that I was away from the business. What makes it ugly is it's a really bright shade of yellow, or orange, or mango. What has made it even uglier over the years is all the damage I've inflicted upon it. The countless hours outside, subjected to the sun and the sweat and the rain and the bug spray. But it's a number of unrelated factors that make it my favorite hat. Chief among these of course is that it just fits good on my head. Actually, it fits perfectly. Not too tight, not too loose. Just perfect. It's made of lightweight rip-stop nylon with a heavy canvas strap and the bill never loses its shape. It dries quickly after being wet. And whenever I travel with my wife and kids I like to wear it because they'll never lose me in the crowd. You can see this hat a mile away. I've hiked hundreds of miles in the mountains of Montana and I've traveled to some truly special places around the world wearing this hat. That ugly yellow hat holds many of my most favorite memories.

When I learned about Christ the King's theme verse for this year, this beautiful text from Colossians about how we respond to God's love by being "clothed with compassion," I couldn't help but think about the things I like to wear. I would imagine, that many of you are like me and can quickly think of your favorite t-shirt or sweatshirt, pairs of shoes and yes, maybe even your favorite hat. What makes them your favorite? Is it because, like my hat, they fit perfectly or serve an important purpose? Or are they your favorite because they were witness to some significant experiences and now hold onto your most favorite memories?

Over the course of the last two weeks and for the next few we're digging more deeply into what it means for us to be "clothed with compassion" and more importantly how to respond to this call with action. Already you've been charged to respond with acts of *welcome*. God's radical hospitality opens doors, creates space for dialogue, heals and nurtures. Do you remember the stories of the Believer's Bible Chapel in Monrovia, Liberia? You've also been charged to respond with acts of *courage*. To remember that you are not alone in this and that, with a God who makes all things possible, your willingness to step up or jump in or come forward is all it takes to get things started. This week, when unpacking how this call to compassion compels us to respond, we're taking a look at acts of *service*.

Now to the casual observer, it might have seemed a little unfriendly (especially for someone who recently preached on "acts of *welcome*") to ask the new guy to preach on only his second day on the job. But I have a feeling that Pastor Peter thought it was safe to assume the guy who's owned and operated his own restaurant for the past 18 years, might have something to say about acts of *service*. Well you can be the judge if he was right about me, but more importantly I would argue that the writers of the scriptures certainly had plenty to say about acts of *service*.

Today's Gospel starts off with one of the strangest requests yet by our wandering band of seemingly clueless disciples. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Seriously? James and John seem to be employing a staple childhood tactic found in every 3-12 year-olds arsenal for getting what they want. You can only imagine James and John when they were little, running up to their dad Zebedee...

"hey Dad, hey Dad... Dad, Dad, Dad!"

"What do you boys want this time?"

"If we ask, will you promise to say yes? Please? Please say yes! Please say yes!"

Presumably James & John are now adults and yet this is how they approach their teacher? "We have something really important to ask but before we ask, will you just agree to do it?" I'm guessing that James and John had a feeling, like so many times before, that Jesus wasn't about to give them any easy answers to their questions. And they were right.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right, and one at your left, in your glory." They see Jesus as king. Of course they want to be by his side. Great proximity breeds great reward. We may be quick to criticize James and John but their request, if we're honest, reflects our own. How often do we live by the credo, 'it's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know that really counts.' 'Want to be successful? Then surround yourself with successful people.' James and John's request isn't off base at all and it strikes a little too close to home. Seeming to make matters worse, James and John offer up their request out of the earshot of the other 10 disciples, as if there's only so much glory to go around and they want dibs. Of course when the others hear of it, they get mad at James & John for being greedy. The rest of disciples want their fare share of glory too.

But once again Jesus has a very different vision for what this glory that the disciples seek their rightful share of really looks like. Jesus' glory isn't defined by ruling like a king but rather by being a servant and slave to all. Today's Gospel concludes, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." What Jesus wishes for his disciples so too he wishes for us.

In early January of 2011, I traveled with 9 others from Jacob's Well, my church in Minneapolis, to Haiti to spend a week doing 'mission' work in Port au Prince. To say that it was a mind changing experience would be a tragic understatement. We went there to help in the efforts to help the Haitians recover from the devastating earthquake that destroyed much of the country and killed hundreds of thousands of people in 2010. Specifically, we helped out an orphanage that was attempting to rebuild its infrastructure in order to continue its care for some of the most vulnerable and least valued. Mostly we cleared rubble. We also built a few walls and even built a chicken coop. But the most significant things that happened during that time happened in the conversations in broken Creole, French and English that we shared with the Haitians we encountered.

If there were ever a people that had the right to be angry with God, it should be the Haitians. They've been undeniably oppressed by colonialists, corrupt governments and now one of the most devastating natural disasters of modern history. Yet anger is not

an emotion we encountered on our trip. The founder and director of the orphanage was a former nun. Gertrude is an amazing woman and she helped us come to understand how the Haitians relate to God, even in the midst of utter desperation. Gertrude reminded us that God's promise to love us doesn't ever go away. This is a promise that's made for each of us and it's delivered first hand in the waters of baptism. A massive earthquake is not a sign that God stopped loving the Haitians. On the contrary, in it's aftermath, the Haitians cling to the promise that God's love remains. The Haitians we met, had insurmountable uncertainty in their lives but the one thing they were certain of was that God loved them. What an amazing witness to a bunch of over-privileged white folks who wanted to do some good. We went to Haiti to help. And they helped us more. Turns out it wasn't about us. It was about God and God's vision for us.

The Apostle Paul describes that vision in our theme text this year. He describes a new life and, more importantly, a new way of living. Paul, in another one of his letters to the church at Philippi, reminds these early Christians that Jesus' glory came not from taking on the posture of God but from taking on the posture of a slave. This passage, commonly referred to as the "Christ Hymn" describes this type of service or slavery as a "kenotic" love, a literal emptying of oneself in service to the other. This is not for the faint of heart and it's certainly not for any of us hung up on who gets to sit on the right and who gets to sit on the left.

In a [recent interview](#) with award-winning author and theologian Marilynne Robinson, she states, "Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive—"Love thy neighbor as thyself"—which I think properly understood means your neighbor is as worthy of love as you are, not that you're actually going to be capable of this sort of superhuman feat. But you're supposed to run against the grain. It's supposed to be difficult. It's supposed to be a challenge."

It's interesting to note that the person conducting that interview was the President of the United States. Yes, that's right, that President of the United States. He met with Ms. Robinson last month in Iowa because he wanted to gain her insight on how we, as a country, should be caring for each other. The New York Times published the details of their interview just this week. In their conversation, the President asked what I think is a very pressing question for our times. He asked, "How do you reconcile the idea of faith being really important to you and you caring a lot about taking faith seriously with the fact that, at least in our democracy and our civic discourse, it seems as if folks who take religion the most seriously sometimes are also those who are suspicious of those not like them?"

I think Ms. Robinson got it right when she responded, "Well, I don't know how seriously they do take their Christianity, because if you take something seriously, you're ready to encounter difficulty, run the risk, whatever. I mean, when people are turning in on themselves—and God knows, arming themselves and so on—against the imagined other, they're not taking their Christianity seriously. I don't know—I mean, this has happened over and over again in the history of Christianity, there's no question about that, or other religions, as we know."

“Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive.” Want to have a taste of glory? Want to enter the kingdom? Want to be first in line? Want to be great, just like Jesus? Mark’s Gospel is here to remind us... “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all.”

Yes, I know a few things about service but I’m not about to pretend I’ve got this kind of service all figured out. There’s a big difference between helping you pick out the right bottle of wine to go with your braised lamb and helping you find the cup that Jesus talks of drinking. There’s a big difference between making sure your water glass never runs empty and making sure you understand what the waters of your baptism should mean in your life. Fortunately, today’s message isn’t about what I’m able to do in your life, it’s about what God is able and is already doing in your life.

The one who needs you most is already in your life, waiting to be served. Have you found them yet? Actually, there’s more than one. There’s way more than one. They’re all around you. They are your ‘neighbor,’ whom you’re called to love, and they live with you and next door to you, around the block from you and around the world from you. During the offering today, we’re going to watch some stories about how a few members of this congregation are already experiencing what it means to be clothed with compassion and responding with acts of service. Listen closely to their stories and hear how God is making all things new, in, through and with these already amazingly compassionate people.

And here’s one last story from me... The earthquake that would forever change the lives of millions in Haiti struck at 4:53pm local time on January 12, 2010. In its aftermath, those that care deeply about the recovery efforts have adopted the slogan “Ne pas bliye Ayiti” which is Creole for “never forget Haiti.”

On one of the last days of our time in Port au Prince our group had the opportunity to visit a hospital for Haitians suffering from Tuberculosis and dying of HIV-related complications. I got to spend some time on the men’s ward interacting with a number of the patients and trying desperately to communicate how much we cared about them and wanted them to feel loved and not forgotten. At times we were able to joke and laugh and the smiling seemed to be the best medicine. As we were preparing to leave, one of the patients became very animated and started reaching for my arm. I was able to get our driver to come over and help interpret what the patient was trying to tell me. The driver indicated that the patient was asking me for something. At first I assumed, like the many others we had interacted with, the patient was asking for my watch or for some money. But the driver laughed a little and replied that what patient wanted was my hat, my ugly, sweaty, yellow hat. I protested saying there’s no way he could want such an ugly hat. The patient thought about this for a moment and then had the driver tell me how he was worried that he wouldn’t remember us after we left and that if he was able to wear my hat, his head would always be able to remember.

Ne pas bliye Ayite. Never forget Haiti.

I’ll never forget driving away from that hospital and seeing my ugly, sweaty, yellow, favorite hat sitting on that patient’s smiling head.

I give thanks today for all that God continues to do in my life and in yours. Amen.