

“Simple Service”
September 24, 2006

James 3:13-4:3
Mark 9:30-37

I love this story from the Gospel of Mark. As it was handed down during the first few decades after Jesus’ death, the story depicts Jesus telling his disciples about the drama that lies ahead for him . . . and for them. He tells them that the Son of man will be handed over and killed -- and then “will rise,” but they just don’t get it. As the Gospel describes the scene, the disciples don’t understand what Jesus is saying, and they don’t have the courage to *try* to understand. They could have asked him to explain, but “they were afraid.” Too afraid to say anything, too afraid to reveal their lack of understanding.

Now, I’ve always been a fan of the underdog, whether it was, earlier in my life, whoever was playing the Dallas Cowboys on any given Sunday; or it’s the college basketball teams that aren’t “supposed” to win anything in the NCAA tournament but who actually become one of the Final Four; or it’s the shyest, nerdiest kid in the finals of the National Spelling Bee. So in this scene from the Gospel of Mark, I’m rooting for the disciples, hoping against the odds that they’ll finally get it. I’m hoping they’ll finally start to see that, through Jesus, God is turning our usual human expectations upside down. I’m hoping they’ll see that, through Jesus, God is calling us to recognize and honor the holy in society’s outcasts, not in society’s most powerful people and institutions.

So I’m rooting for these guys as they make their way to Capernaum. Come on, y’all, Jesus keeps giving you all sorts of clues that God is in acts of healing and service, not in the consolidation of power or in self-aggrandizement. Come on, guys, you can see this; you really can.

But, of course, that’s not how the story goes. Instead, on the way to Capernaum, the disciples argue about who is the greatest. Like a bad takeoff on Muhammad Ali, the disciples, after hearing that Jesus will soon die, are debating who is the greatest. Remember that, as the Gospel of Mark describes him, Jesus has been healing and preaching and feeding the multitudes – and predicting his own death – and, in response, the only thing the disciples can do is argue about who is the greatest. In the face of their misguided discussion, Jesus’ response is clear and direct: to be first, you must be last of all and servant of all. . . . To be great, you must be servant of all. *Service* is what defines “greatness.”

Pretty simple, doesn’t it? And it’s not a piece of sacred wisdom that’s limited to Christianity, by any means. Friday night, during the Erev Rosh Hashanah service in Burlingame Hall, Rabbi Greenbaum put it just as simply: the way to be great, the way to be a *hero*, is to serve.

It *is* simple, but that doesn’t mean it’s always easy.

During the last week, as I spent time with this reading, memories from my days at the New Mexico Attorney General’s Office kept popping up. Some of my co-workers there – attorneys, paralegals, secretaries, and receptionists – genuinely understood their work to be in service to the people of the State, perhaps even to God. Others, however –

and this group was almost entirely lawyers – seemed to think their work was all about them, about their climb to “the top,” whatever the “top” was.

The people in that first group were a joy to work with. Because they didn’t take themselves so seriously, they had much better senses of humor, and because they understood themselves as public servants, they were more willing to help the public *and* help those of us who were new in the office.

What about the people in that *second* group? Well, I think you know. I remember one lawyer in particular. She was always eager to tell you about her most recent victory and how she had outsmarted the other side. She was also always eager to show you the latest picture of her with President Clinton or with Hillary Clinton or with the Governor. She didn’t treat the secretarial staff very well, and, unless you had political connections of your own, she didn’t seem to have much use for you. Her humor always seemed to be at someone else’s expense, and her laugh sounded brittle, not joyous. I think she would have told you that she was happy, living life on her terms, but she didn’t *seem* happy.

Ever since my time at the AG’s office, whenever I’ve started to take myself and my “career” too seriously, I’ve tried to remember those public servants and the lawyer who seemed to be serving only herself. I’ve used them as examples of who I want and *don’t* want to be. And when that wasn’t enough to return my focus to *service*, God would also seem to find a way to remind me of something that happened in the AG’s office one day when the computer network went down. That not-so-service oriented lawyer had a brief due at 5:00pm. She had been typing away when her computer stopped working, and then she and everyone else had to wait for the computer system to come back up. And, after a while, the system did get going again. Most of the support staff knew it immediately, and they told most of the lawyers ... but they didn’t tell her. They waited until the last possible moment before they let her know she could turn her computer on and get back to work. She was able to finish her brief ... but only minutes before her deadline.

Please don’t get me wrong. I don’t countenance this sort of revenge, but I sure understand it. Likewise, I don’t think of God as a vengeful God, but I do believe our actions have consequences from which God does not protect us. So I don’t think the secretarial staff was carrying out divine justice, but I have, for years, taken this story as a warning about wanting to be the greatest and to *be* served. If we ourselves are not willing to serve, we may find that, when we need someone else’s help and service, none comes or it comes only very late in the day.

Now I want to talk about you. I hope it doesn’t surprise you to hear that, even though I’ve been studying you all, on paper and in person, for over a year now, I have yet to encounter anyone who reminds me of that particular attorney ... thanks heavens! The challenge I see in your lives and in our life together is *not* the need to move from non-service into service, but the need to discern the service and the ministry God is calling us to embrace. As I said two weeks ago, an open-hearted look at the needs of our sisters and brothers in Sonoma and around the world shows us countless opportunities to serve, but the only thing any of us can do is offer the love and service that are ours to offer.

In the months and years ahead, we will continue to discover the ways in which God is calling us to serve. Our continued discernment will come through conversation, prayer, worship, even committee work. We will see the service God is calling us to do as

we walk the labyrinth by ourselves or with each other. We will hear and follow God's whisper as we sit together in silence during Friday morning meditations. We will encounter the living Christ who still says, "Follow me," when we become aware of a need that we feel inexplicably called to address.

And, sometimes, we may suddenly realize that, through God's abundant grace, we have been God's faithful, loving servants all along, even though we didn't know it.

Rachel Remen tells a story of such a realization and revelation.

George came to Dr. Remen six months after he had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, and he told her the story of his life. Even though he was the CEO of a highly successful company that manufactured a medical device that George had patented, he told the doctor that he had wasted his life.

"I have two ex-wives and five children," he said. I support all of them, but I don't know any of them. I do not think they will miss me. I've nothing behind me but a lot of money. What an old fool. A stupid old fool."

Another of Dr. Remen's patients at the time was a woman who used the device that George's invention and company had made possible. That medical device had changed Stephanie's life. Before, she was almost housebound. She was unable to work, unable to do much more than manage the symptoms of her medical condition. After she was fitted with this device, she had gotten a job, gotten married, and had a child. She had, in effect, been given another life.

Dr. Remen asked Stephanie if she would be willing to write George an anonymous letter about her experience. Stephanie's answer was itself another question: would this man be willing to come to her home for dinner?

When Dr. Remen conveyed this request to George, he was touched but wanted, instead, to take Stephanie and her husband to an elegant restaurant for dinner. Stephanie refused the counteroffer, and so George went to her home for dinner.

Rachel Remen describes the meeting with George the week after the dinner:

He sat in my office shaking his head in wonder. He had expected to have dinner with this young couple, but when he arrived, George was welcomed by Stephanie's whole family. [Her mother, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins were there.] Her husband's parents were there, too, and many of her friends and neighbors – the whole community of people who had sustained her in the years she was an invalid. It was an extraordinary meal and a wonderful celebration.

"But that was not the important part, Rachel," George told me. "They had really come to tell me a story; they had each played a part in it and had a different side of it to share. It took them over three hours to tell it. It was the story of Stephanie's life. I cried most of the time. And at the very end, Stephanie came to me and said, 'This is really a story about you, George. We thought you needed to know.' And I did. I did."

I had tears in my eyes. "How many of these things do you make every year, George?" I asked him. "Close to ten thousand," he said softly. "I just knew the numbers, Rachel. I had no idea what they meant."

“I had no idea what they meant.” George had had no idea how he had served the world, but Stephanie gave him a small, glorious glimpse. Of course, it was still true that both of George’s marriages had ended in divorce and neither he nor his children knew each other. His life, like our lives, was still a mixed bag of mistakes, misdeeds -- and utter blessedness. Even though he had been focused on what he considered his failures, George probably did have at least a *vague* sense that he had been of service before he met Stephanie. One of my deepest hopes for you is that you, too, are aware that you have been of service in ways you can name and in ways that you can only sense. But, even more, I hope that you, like George, are given clear, breathtaking views of at least some of the ways God has brought love and healing to the world through you, for God has blessed and continues to bless the world through each of us. Never forget that, my beloved sisters and brothers. Never, never forget that God loves and blesses the world through you.

To be first, Jesus said, you must be last of all and servant of all. Service, simple service. We are not asked to determine just how our service will affect our family and friends, our community, or our world before we act. We are simply asked to serve, to give ourselves in hope, in love, in compassion ... and maybe even when we’re cranky. Service, simple service. A welcome to the stranger, a meal for the hungry, a visit to the sick, a massive organizing campaign for peace and justice. Creating and loving a family; creating and sharing a song, a poem, or a picture; caring for a wounded deer or a wounded world. Some acts of service can seem tiny; others can seem overwhelming. They are all acts of service, and they are all vessels of God’s healing grace. For the chance to be bearers of God’s grace and for so much more, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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