

Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 2021 - Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rolf Svanoë

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Dr. Rolf Svanoë, guest preacher

Gospel - Mark 10:35-45

Good morning. I'm glad to be with you this morning to give Pastor Amy a break. She performed a wedding in Dubuque yesterday. I know she will be back for Amalia's ordination. My wife Kimberly and I moved to Decorah two years ago. We moved from Harmony, Minnesota, where I served a church for five years. I've been retired one year but have been doing a lot of supply preaching in area churches. We will be joining Good Shepherd next week along with other new members. We love this church, its mission and its leadership, and we feel a warm welcome here. And, when I learned that my Uncle and Aunt were charter members back in 1958, I knew that this would be our new church home.

When people join a church, they often do so with an affirmation of baptism. We say "yes" to the covenant God made with us when we were baptized. There are five things that characterize that baptismal covenant, five things we do as members of Christ's church.

- To live among God's faithful people
- To hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper
- To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- To serve all people, following the example of Jesus
- And to strive for justice and peace in all the earth

I want to specifically focus on the fourth statement- to serve all people, following the example of Jesus. It fits well with our Gospel text where Jesus said, "**The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.**" Jesus came to be a servant. And calls us to be servants too, as we follow him.

Let's explore the context of Jesus' words. In Mark's Gospel, this is now the third time that Jesus has told his disciples that he will die in Jerusalem. The growing popularity of his movement was seen as a threat to the ruling authorities and a challenge to their power. They were intent on getting rid of him. But each time Jesus told his disciples about his impending death, they just didn't get it. In our Gospel reading today, James and John are oblivious to Jesus' words. They came to Jesus with a request. Jesus, when you gain power in the new kingdom God is bringing about, may we sit at your right and left hand? May we have positions of power and authority? I imagine that in the quiet conversations between the two of them, they had visions of greatness, wealth and power. Once again, Jesus had to explain how this is not the way it works in God's coming reign. The world values greatness, wealth and power. Plenty of tyrants and dictators promise to make their countries great by seducing people with promises of power and

wealth. But Jesus said that this is not how God works in the world. **“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”** Jesus identifies greatness with humble service and using God’s blessings to help others, especially the hurting and the poor.

How many of you like to be servants? How many of you would rather have people serve you? We grow up in homes with parents who basically serve us and take care of our needs. As children, we get used to the idea of someone serving us- our parents. But one thing parents need to teach their children is the importance of serving others. Somehow in the process of growing up we need to learn that the world does not revolve around us. We need to learn compassion and empathy for others. We need to become sensitive to others' needs and be motivated to help them. How does that happen?

We all know about the need to do service for others. Schools and churches are including service hours into their programs. They know the benefit of this kind of learning outside the classroom. But when parents and children serve together, something really special can happen.

Let me give you an example. The first year Gary went on a Hunger Walk, his mother pulled him in his red wagon. He was only three, after all. The next year, he walked some and rode in his wagon part of the way. If asked, he would tell you that he was walking so people wouldn’t be hungry. When he was five, Gary and his mother wrote to family members and special friends, asking them to pledge for their walk. Gary signed the letter too. When he was ten, Gary knew more about hunger in the world, and he was concerned about children around the world who go to bed hungry. He never failed to pray for hungry people in his bedtime prayers. Gary hoped that by the time he is a parent, there won’t have to be Hunger Walks.

Here is the point: When service and faith are integrated in an event where parents and children are serving together, children learn what the parents are role modeling. That can have huge benefits for a family. When you and your family serve you may see others with much greater problems than yours. It gives you a new appreciation for what you have. But it also gives you a different perspective on the problems in your family. Your problems may not seem so bad in comparison. Serving can also help grow a sense of compassion and empathy toward others, and that will impact how siblings treat each other. It decreases our selfishness and the notion that life is all about me and my desires. Serving as a family allows parents to model positive character traits like compassion and selflessness. Serving together helps children, especially teenagers, recognize they are not the center of the universe. Serving as a family is associated with higher rates of education, lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse, reduced misbehavior, and enhanced family unity. Serving as a family is the perfect opportunity to spend quality time together while making a difference in your community and the world.

Former President Jimmy Carter's house building work with Habitat for Humanity is well-known. Habitat for Humanity founder, Millard Fuller, once visited a Habitat house, which Carter had personally helped to build. As he drove up to the house, he spoke with a little boy, six years old

or so, who was playing in the front yard. Fuller said to the boy, "You have a pretty house." After a few more moments' conversation, he asked the boy, "I want to ask you a question. Who built your house?" Millard thought that the boy would say, "Jimmy Carter." Instead, he replied, "Jesus." When we work humbly on behalf of those who are poor and needy, we truly are working with the hands of Jesus himself. "God's work, our hands."

When you hear leaders promising to make us great, keep these words of Jesus in mind.

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." How do we measure greatness? According to Jesus, we measure greatness by humble service to those in need. We serve because Jesus has first served us. Through his death and resurrection, he has served us completely by revealing the love and forgiveness of God for us and for all people.