

“The Value of Servanthood”
Mark 10:35–45
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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In his biography of Randall Lolley, Steve Pressley, who will be with us this Wednesday evening, includes a reflection by Carson Brisson who is now a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia where I did doctoral work. As some of you may remember, Carson and his family also worshiped with us quite often for several years when his son was a student at N.C. State.

When Carson and his wife were twenty-one years old and just married, they stuffed everything they owned into an old car and drove to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in nearby Wake Forest, North Carolina. As they started to take their meager belongings into a residence hall for students and spouses on a blazing hot August afternoon, a friendly couple just a bit older than them started helping them carry things up the stairs. They introduced themselves just as Randall and Lou, they never mentioned what their connection was to the seminary, but they made the Brissons feel welcome.

About a week later, classes began, Carson and his wife went to chapel, and they noticed the couple who had helped them move in sitting on the dais. They wondered why. Then, the couple was introduced as President and Mrs. Lolley, and the Brissons were amazed (*Randall Lolley: Thanks for the Memories*, p. 83).

Anyone who has known Randall and Lou will quickly say – that sounds just like them! They have never put on airs, they have always treated everyone with dignity and respect, and they have always been willing to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty to do whatever needs to be done. A central theme of Randall’s preaching, teaching and pastoral ministry has been servanthood. He has seen Jesus’ example of washing his disciples’ feet as a cue for how we are called to do ministry. “For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve,” says Jesus in our reading from Mark, “and to give his life a ransom for many.”

It is a central theme of the New Testament, and yet, as we know, it is not a theme everyone has embraced. Many pastors function in a more authoritarian way and many churches are torn apart by power struggles. Rather than focusing on the little things everyone can do to help each other and contribute to the mission of Christ, so many people get caught up in petty ego battles and needless disputes.

In one church I served, every current issue was complicated by tensions between two power groups, each led by a central matriarch. Their differences were not theological. They were about power and prestige. It all went back to something that happened thirty years before. The spouse of one matriarch was not made deacon chair when she thought he should be. The other matriarch was blamed, they took up their swords and they never put them down.

The irony of this story is that the spouse was a quintessential servant leader, a model deacon who would do anything for anyone in need but had little interest in being chair of any group, much less the deacons. His spouse wanted him to be in this role and was deeply disappointed that he was not.

It seems so tragic and self-defeating, but most of us know stories like this, and even those of us who would hope never to have missed the mark quite so badly still struggle at times with misplaced desires and ego concerns. Can we honestly say we have never felt slighted, ever wanted more recognition? Have we not all crossed the line, emotionally at least, and lost sight of our basic calling to serve?

Even the way churches view leadership can be revealing. In some churches I have served, there has been a division between major and minor committees, as well as a distinction as to which committees and areas of leadership require a person to be a church member. You can guess which groups are viewed to be more important — finance, properties, personnel — those that involve money. Teaching children, youth and adults about the Bible, being involved in service in the community or on mission trips — well, anyone can do those things.

There is a certain logic to this thinking, but what does it say about what we value most and how we view servanthood, the way Jesus models for us? In some settings, I have heard people say they had no

interest in serving as a deacon because deacons weren't doing anything important. What they meant was that deacons were not functioning as a board of directors, making decisions. They were "just" visiting the sick, bereaved and homebound; offering spiritual guidance; welcoming new members; leading the way in social ministry. Just... We give lip service to the idea of servanthood, even become emotional when we think about Jesus' example, but reveal little real interest in following it.

But we are in good company because this struggle goes all the way back to the first followers of Jesus. In today's reading from Mark, Jesus' disciples clearly have little interest in his teaching about servanthood. For the third time in three chapters, Jesus has predicted his suffering and death on a cross, and for the third time, the twelve stooges have revealed that either they haven't heard him, they haven't understood what he is saying or they don't want to hear this message.

The first time Jesus speaks of his death, Peter rebukes him, in effect, saying the Messiah has no business laying down his life. The second time, the boys have a little chit-chat about who is the greatest among them. Jesus may suffer and die, but they want to know who gets to be the line leader! Now, as Jesus speaks of suffering and death a third time, James and John make a request, a demand really, as they tell Jesus they want him to do whatever they ask. They want to sit at Jesus' right hand and left in his glory.

It is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate request. For one thing, they don't even know what Jesus' glory is. They don't know what they are asking. It's why Jesus asks if they really want to drink from his cup and be baptized with his baptism. He is talking about his suffering and death. But even if they understood this, it wouldn't make sense to demand a place of privilege from the One who did not count equality with God as a thing to be exploited but rather emptied himself into human form, as a servant, and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

This is only two disciples, but when the other ten find out what they have asked, they are angry — not because James and John have missed the point but because they didn't think of the idea first!

Realizing they just don't get it, Jesus goes on to explain that this way of sacrifice and self-giving is not just for him, it is for everyone who follows him. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant," he says, "and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." But as we know, the disciples still don't get it.

How can they be so clueless? How can we? Well, let's be honest, it is not an easy path. And there are cultural forces at work, in addition to human tendencies, all of which view service as inferior and sacrifice as a weakness. We tend to think of ourselves first and everything around us seems to reinforce this instinct. But it is self-defeating. Putting others first is the way to fulfillment. Jesus' recommendation of servanthood is not an arbitrary test of faithfulness or a sign that God is some kind of sadist who wants people, beginning with Jesus, to suffer. Focusing on the needs of others is the most fulfilling way to live.

I knew a man who had been very successful as a high-powered corporate attorney. Everything was about making money and he was good at it, but it didn't do anything for his soul, it didn't make him happy. He ended up losing his edge, and then losing everything. He had to start over and he did but with different priorities. He still made a decent living, but he invested more time and energy in the people around him, in his faith and in helping others. His personal net worth might have gone down, but his ultimate value went up.

That's the perspective we teach in this church. I remember RAs helping Dana and me get our food to the table on Wednesday nights when we moved to Raleigh. It was part of an organized approach to teach young boys about the value of service. Children have been paired with senior adults to form relationships that are mutually nurturing, and in the process, children learn about giving to others. Youth learn about servanthood on mission trips, in weekly studies and service projects. Our adults care for each other and serve the community in many ways.

Consider the Hanging of the Greens and Toy Joy, two of the largest endeavors of this church involving all ages and parts of the church family. Each of these endeavors involves a huge number of volunteers who labor together doing simple tasks. Everyone's

contribution matters but no one is in the spotlight. Hearts are lifted in praise and devotion; children of God experience love and compassion.

This spirit runs through the fiber of this church. There is less ego and more humility, less power seeking and more service, less corporate culture and more Jesus culture than most churches I know. We are not perfect, but we do understand what our calling is and genuinely want to embrace it. And therein lies our hope.

Well, there and in the basic reality that Jesus never gives up on us. The disciples argue with him all the way to the cross. They try to persuade him to pursue another path, and they refuse to buy into it for themselves, but Jesus doesn't give up on them. He keeps repeating his message like a parent seemingly wasting breath with children who refuse to listen. And eventually, even though it is on the other side of the cross, they get it. Jesus never gives up on the first twelve nor will he ever give up on us. He calls us to a life of servanthood, he shows us how it is done, and he keeps the image before us until we embrace it.

I have often said there is nothing in the church that everyone loves. We may try to find an exception, but there is always someone who will prove us wrong. One thing I do that some have said everyone loves is present dramatic sermons, perhaps because they are less dull than ordinary ones, but it is not the case that everyone loves those sermons.

In another setting a woman wrote me a note about one dramatic sermon. She clearly did not like any of them, but this one offended her because it was not dignified. Of particular concern to her was that I preached this sermon on Deacon Ordination Sunday. I was in period costume, wearing sandals, and it offended her to see me offer blessings to deacons wearing sandals. It is a dignified office, she said.

I did talk with her and had a helpful conversation, but I can't imagine more appropriate attire for blessing deacons, if we know what deacons are — servant leaders following the example of Christ, carrying someone else's belongings up a set of stairs like Randall and Lou Lolley, carrying other people's food like RAs on a Wednesday night, helping an immigrant family move in to Welcome House. That's what deacons are, that's what Christians are, that's who we are, at least at our best.