

Sermon for October 20, 2024
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost at St. Michael's Church
The Reverend Joshua Wong

In the Gospel according to Mark that was just read, Mark focus' on the difference between how God sees greatness and how we see greatness. For God, greatness is learning to be a servant to others, as opposed to the world's self-absorbed forms of greatness. In the past few weeks, Mark conveys to us that Jesus is alerting his disciples of his upcoming imminent death and resurrection. Jesus announces this three times to his disciples, and all three times the disciples misunderstand him.

The first time, Jesus tells them that he rejects the power of military conquest and domination, and instead takes up the posture of a suffering servant. The second time, Jesus redefines "greatness" as becoming a "servant of all." And the third time, Jesus returns to the theme of servanthood and sums up his role with the phrase, "A ransom for many."

The disciples didn't get it the first two times, and they don't get it this time either. James and John want to spend eternity sitting in seats of honor beside Jesus. Though Jesus objects, it was too late, the other disciples were already jealous and angry at James and John.

Because of the upheaval, Jesus had to call a meeting with all of them. And basically he said, although the Romans may understand greatness in terms of brute force and tyranny and sitting in seats of honor — we do things differently! As Jesus has taught them many times, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all” (Mark 10:43-44). Don’t you see? We come not to be served, but to serve! We’re not about ascending into the power of supremacy for the sake of domination — on the contrary, we’re about descending into the power of servanthood for the life of the world.”

This is what true greatness looks like to Jesus, according to Philippians 2: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant”

It never ceases to amaze me how Christ teaches us to live. It is often the opposite of what we learn in our modern world. Our society teaches us to shove and push our way to the top, and so we learn that wealth, prestige and titles are our greatest goals to achieve that and humility is weakness.

This past Tuesday was our monthly vestry meeting. As usual, during our

vestry meetings, we have a brief Bible Study before we begin Church business. We always study the Gospel passage for the upcoming Sunday. This week, I asked them to tell me their thoughts about this passage. One of their reflections stood out to me. Someone said, “What God considers greatness is not what we think of as power and money, instead to God, greatness is servanthood.”

So, what is God asking us to be? What does being a servant mean in our modern day? Being a servant is hard and powerless, especially when we think we deserve something we are not getting. This is the time when the Holy Spirit needs to guide our actions and thoughts. Where does justice, love, and kindness begin and end?

This week I spoke to my sister who lives in NYC, regarding the upcoming elections. We spoke about learning to be open to the opinions of our opponents. How are we to act? Are we to bow down to their viewpoints? How can we be open to their viewpoints when we don't have any common ground to stand on?

Jesus repeatedly says throughout our Gospel readings that if you want to be

the first, you must be the last. If you want to be great, then learn to serve others.

But what does that entail? I believe what Jesus is NOT asking us to do is to let injustice happen, but rather to combat it with love. We should strive for the same mind as Jesus. We may never come to a complete agreement with others, but we are asked to have the mind of Jesus, which always propels our lives towards the arc of justice. One of the results of being a servant is to be humble enough to listen, and possibly understand more about the other person.

Jesus is our example of what a servant is. Our Gospel passage says, “For even I, the Messiah, am not here to be served, but to help others, and give my life as a ransom for many.”

On the contrary, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus to ask for power and status. Their desire for power led to disharmony among the disciples. And as one vestry member observed, even among Jesus’ disciples, power led to “bickering.”

I am happy to serve at St. Michael's church where there are no power hungry people. Instead, you can be assured that everyone here respects each other and works selflessly and tirelessly. Last week, when I was speaking to someone outside the sacristy, I overheard one parishioner say to another, "Oh, I'm glad you got more coffee pods, I forgot to get some." To me this is servanthood. Instead of waiting for others to serve us, Jesus reminds us that we are to serve others.

At St. Michael's we are a family, and we don't wait for someone to serve us, rather serve others. If we see a need, let's not wait for someone else to fill it, let's do it ourselves. There are many ways we can serve.

Serving is not only through "doing things." As this is our second stewardship Sunday, serving comes also in the form of time, talent and treasure. Where can you offer your time? Did you know someone every week has to hand water the pots of flowers around our building, or vacuum the chapel, or launder the linens, or arrange the flowers? There are others who serve as counters for the offering, and who print out the bulletins.

Talent is demonstrated by singing in the choir, being an usher, being a

lector, writing sermons, writing articles for our newsletter, serving as an acolyte, working on IT issues and filming the service.

Treasure comes from all of us who return to God what he generously gave us in the form of monetary means. The annual Stewardship Campaign is NOT about making people feel guilty, but it's our annual reminder to offer God back what he has given to us. We are God's stewards of all we possess. Some years may be abundant, while other years may be lean. God knows our intentions. As we learned last week, offering is about trusting the giver of our gifts.

This is how together we build up the body of Christ while living in harmony with each other. The early church was exactly this model, it was where everyone shared time, talent, and treasure, so that no one would be lacking in need. This is harmony, and this is servanthood. May we continue to learn what it means to be a servant of all.

Amen.