

Mark 10:35-45

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Not to be Served but to Serve

When I was serving at Broad Street in Philadelphia, we celebrated the Lord's Supper every single week. It was the keystone of our worshipping community, and it was important to us that every single week, we could partake in the abundant feast of the kingdom of God, proclaiming that there is a place for everyone, that there is enough, that all people are named beautiful, worthy children of God.

It was important to tell this story every single week because so much of what we saw around us—injustice and poverty and violence—it made us wonder how true the story was. It made us wonder if we really had a place in the story of salvation, if the story was still unfolding.

Gathering at the Table to taste and see was what kept us going.

One particular Sunday, when I was presiding at the Table, I asked a woman named Ms. Deborah if she would be willing to be one of the servers that day. At first, she hesitated. You could see her weighing her options: disappoint the pastor or go wayyy out of her comfort zone.

But after some hemming and hawing, she said, "Yes! Yes, I would love to do that. Just tell me what to do." So together, we served the bread and the cup. And she beamed and clearly enjoyed the experience.

But I did not know how meaningful it had been until that following week, I cannot tell you how many people came up to me to tell me how excited and honored Ms. Deborah was to serve communion that day. She was over the moon, and all week, all she could talk about was that she got to serve Communion.

The following Sunday, when she came into the sanctuary, she giddily skipped over to me to ask if she could serve Communion again. To which, I clearly said yes. And in fact, every Sunday henceforth, if Ms. Deborah, she was a de facto Communion server.

You see, my friends, she didn't have a lot of money. She wasn't able to volunteer throughout the week or serve on the leadership team. But she could stand there and offer the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation to all of her siblings in Christ. And when she did that, she felt worthy, loved. She felt like she had purpose. She felt at home, because she had a place to serve.

In this space, she had been served many times, and this brought her joy and comfort and friendship, but to serve, this brought her a whole other, deeper sense of belonging.

Many of us here are doers, the kinds of people who love to host, to serve, to do for others. So on this level, I assume that many of y'all resonate with this idea of feeling really home when you have a place to serve.

And I believe this is because that's how we are created and called to be. People who serve one another. Not from a place of control or because we expect some quid pro quo. We are called to serve one another from a place of love and with a genuine desire to offer someone wholeness, joy, comfort, love that they need.

I think it's important though to acknowledge that there are times in life when our anxieties, our fears, our own challenges get in the way of living this calling out. It is hard to serve others, to give of yourself, when you feel depleted or like you don't have enough.

And friends, when you are feeling like that, it is not healthy to push yourself to serve others. It breeds resentment. It exhausts you more. The joy of giving and serving disappears and what's left is just a hunger that cannot be satisfied.

One of the most popular metaphors we use to talk about this is the cup. You must first fill up your cup before you can offer drink to another, for how can you serve if your cup is empty? And there are myriad ways we talk about filling our cups or recharging our batteries, and honestly, friends, it is really important that we all find what works for us.

Meditating, exercising, being with friends, reading, gardening...this is a PSA: figure it out and do it! It's good for you.

And also, in the Christian tradition, we don't just use this metaphor of the cup to talk about self-care. We use it to talk about God. Who God is, what God promises, and who God calls us to be.

In our gospel story today, we encounter some pretty anxious, hungry disciples, asking to be lifted up with Jesus, at his left and right hand when he is in his glory.

Immediately before this exchange, Jesus told his disciples for the third time that he was about to be tortured and executed. And after three days, he would rise again. The first time he shared this news with them, Peter challenged him on it, and Jesus

rebuked Peter, “saying get behind me Satan.” The second time Jesus told his disciples, they didn’t understand but were afraid to ask him about it and instead quarreled with one another about who was the greatest.

This third and final time, James and John, sons of Zebedee, responded to Jesus’ prediction with a request to be at his right and left sides. He just finished telling them that he would be condemned to death. He would be mocked, spit upon, tortured, and killed, but after three days, he would rise again.

My first thought was to ask, “Why on earth would they respond in this way?” And in my sweet, sweet optimism, I thought, “Could it be that they were finally beginning to understand, that they were beginning to believe that he would be resurrected? I mean, why else would they ask to sit on his right and his left sides?”

But then, of course, I remembered that this is the gospel of Mark, where the punchline is always how thick-headed the disciples are. They always misunderstand Jesus’ teachings, and Jesus always gets super frustrated with them, but still always keeps them around, teaching them and loving them, regardless of their lack of understanding and their lack of faith.

This episode is no different. James and John were not asking to be crucified, to serve alongside Jesus. They were not asking him to help them pick up their cross so that they could follow him. They were asking to be his right- and left-hand men. His courtiers. His trusted advisors once he took the throne in the kingdom that was coming.

They were not moving from a place of faith and love, they were afraid. They were tired. They were empty, depleted, and moving from a place of insatiable hunger, this time in the form of lust for power.

They did not understand what Jesus was trying to tell them. And they most certainly did not know what they were asking of him.

James and John were trapped in the systems of the world which thrive on domination, violence, and power over. They imagined that this kingdom Jesus kept going on about would be a kingdom like all the other ones they had known on earth. They left their father and their family business, so that they could follow Jesus.

And I imagine that they were hoping that after all this journeying, they might be rewarded in the kingdom that was coming. They imagined that as faithful disciples, they might receive positions of power and authority and perhaps even some wealth that might make up for all they had left behind.

In his pastoral and prophetic way, he responded to them by asking if they were able to be baptized with his baptism, and to drink the cup that he drinks.

The cup was known to them, as it is known to us, as an image of joy and comfort.¹ The Psalmist writes: My head is anointed with oil, and my cup overflows... I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.

Likewise, at this Table, when we lift up the cup, we proclaim the new relationship we have with our God. We recall God's faithfulness and love for us. The cup is a comfort, a salve for our souls, a quench to our thirst, a remedy for our dry bones.

The image of the cup in Scripture, however, has a flip side. It is also an image of suffering. We know that on the night of his arrest, Jesus prayed to God, saying, "If it be your will, take this cup from me." And when we lift up the cup and proclaim the new relationship made possible with our God, we recall that it is because of Jesus' death.

The cup holds within it both comfort and suffering, my friends. Receiving the cup, drinking of the cup, fills us up and then it sets us loose. Frees us from our hunger for power and own security. Calms our anxieties and fears that we do not have enough, that we are not enough.

James and John were hungry. They were tired. Their cups were empty. And they were doing what many of us do when that happens: grab and hoard whatever you can.

And the gift of grace, the gift of the cup, is that it is offered as a remedy to our anxious souls. It frees us from the systems of domination in the world, and then it sends us, my friends, to live the way our God calls us to live. The way Jesus lived. To move and to serve not from a place of anxiety and fear, but from a place of love and freedom. A place of belonging and home. A place of security, where we know who we are and whose we are.

I will close with a prayer from Francis of Assisi:

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,*

¹ Clifton C. Black, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year B*

*for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.