

David C. Myers
October 30, 2011

“The Greatest Among You Will Be Your Servant”

Matthew 23:1 – 12

Text: “The greatest among you will be your servant.” . . . Matthew 23:11

The greatest among you. Who would that be? What degrees would that person have? What jobs would they have held? What kind of wealth? Did they invent something that has benefitted all of humankind? Were they a diplomat that brokered a peace accord? Were they a famous politician? Just what is it that makes that person the “greatest?”

I think when we think of the greatest among us, those are some of the credentials we might conjure up in our minds. We would not be alone. What I have questions about greatness above would comprise the generally accepted “job interview” of the Messiah expected by the Jews just before and as Jesus arrived on the scene. However, Jesus’ birth, life and death, shattered all of those expectations. So it should not come as a huge surprise that Jesus might have something a tad bit different in mind when he starts talking about the greatest among you . . . will be your servant.

Ahhhh. . . the fine print. A servant? Do you mean the one who does my landscaping? The one who cleans my house? And perhaps most fundamentally, as one who professes to be a Christian, does it mean that I should be a servant?

One of the people I admire and think of as a true Christian servant is Clarence Jordan. He exemplifies both the humility and the dogged perseverance that is a hallmark of true servant hood. Among the credentials to his resume as servant is forming the Koinonia Farm, wrote the Cotton Patch Version of the Gospels, and was instrumental in helping Millar and Linda Fuller in the founding Habitat for Humanity.

James Howell tells the story of Clarence Jordan in *Servants, Misfits and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories*¹. Jordan earned a graduate degree in agriculture. But he also became an ardent student of the Bible, learning Greek and becoming a skilled interpreter of the biblical text. While he learned the most sophisticated methods of biblical interpretation, Jordan never lost the simple, almost childlike conviction that all interpretation of scripture is based upon the conviction that we are supposed to do what scripture commands us to do.

Jordan read the book of Acts and noticed that the first Christians shared everything in common, living together, and pooling their resources. Jordan decided he would take the Bible literally and seriously, so he bought a farm in rural Georgia, outside of the little town of Americus, and invited other Christians, both white and black, to come live together, growing crops and sharing what they had. It became known as Koinonia Farm.

Mind you now, Jordan conducted this experiment in the 1940s and 1950s, during the “Red scare” when McCarthy was busy discovering communists under every rock, and before Americans had even begun to wrestle with issues related to racial justice in the Civil Rights Movement. You can imagine how pleased the Ku Klux Klan was to have Jordan in the neighborhood. The harassment was relentless: almost-ripened crops were torched, guns were fired randomly into farm buildings, and crosses were burned beside the driveway.

¹ James Howell, *Servants, Misfits and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories*, Upper Room, 1999.

But it was one thing for Jordan to choose to endure such persecution; it was another for an innocent child, and Jordan was a father who was raising a family. One day, Clarence's daughter, Jan, came home from school in tears. He asked, "Honey, what's wrong?" She said, "Oh, Dad, a lot of the kids are mean, but there's this one boy named Bob Speck. Every time Bob sees me coming down the hallway, he comes up and knocks me down. He throws my books down the hallway. He says the ugliest words to me." Jordan said, "Jan, you've got long fingernails. Why don't you scratch his eyes out?" And she said, "Well, I thought about that, but I heard you say in your sermon that Jesus said we're supposed to love our enemy, so I thought I shouldn't scratch his eyes out." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do: tomorrow I'll go to the school, and I'm going to ask Jesus to excuse me from being a Christian for about 15 minutes while I beat the daylights out of Bob Speck." But then Jan said, "Daddy, you can't do that." He said, "Why not?" She said, "You can't be excused from being a Christian for 15 minutes."

In today's Gospel Jesus gives some instruction on leadership. Remember that these words are spoken by Jesus, Who is on his way to suffer a humiliating death on the cross. And on his way, Jesus gives His followers some teaching on the centrality of humility.

Today's lesson is helpful to all of us on this Sunday as we reflect on what it means to be a member of a church. I think the message of humility is always important when we welcome new people into our local church family. It is important because new members of the family bring new ideas and new foci to the church. To be truly welcoming we have to be open to incorporating the ideas they bring. And this isn't always easy – not just for this church, but all organizations. Being open to change means . . . well, we have to change. And it sure is easier and more comfortable to keep on doing the same ole, same ole.

Ministers face this every time they change churches. While we may have a reservoir of ideas from past experience – but we soon discover that a lot of those ideas need to be kept in the past. Each congregation is different, is located in a different setting, and is in a different place on its development as a church. One of our hymns, "Let My People Seek Their Freedom" (UMH #586) a rewrite of James Russell Lowell's "Once to Every Man and Nation" says it this way:

In the maelstrom of the nations, in the journeying into space,
In the clash of generations, in the hungering for grace,
In our agony and glory, we are called to newer ways
By the Lord of our tomorrows and the God of earth's todays.

So today we welcome Kelly and Eric, James and Stacey, Anne, Ernie, Michael and Audra and we pledge to listen to them and help us grow into newer ways by the God of our tomorrows.

And one of the new ways is this year's Stewardship Program. And this one is radical – it's even based on faith! "So what's so new about that?" you might say, "aren't all stewardship programs based on faith?"

Let's test that assumption. I think if we are honest we will realize that most churches over the years have done it this way:

1. Get an idea from the Finance Committee as to what the budget for the next year will be.
2. Set that as a goal for the Stewardship Campaign.
3. See what the yield is from the pledges to the Stewardship Campaign.
4. Finalize the budget on the “certainty” of pledges.

I would submit to you, that doing it that way, at no point is faith exercised, only good sound business principles. And while that might satisfy the fiscal sanity part for many of us; it basically ignores our faith as Christians, and our belief that our God is a God of abundance and not a god of scarcity.

Secondly, we are witnessing a new experience in church giving. More and more people are not pledging. That is not saying that they don't give or that they don't give with regularity; but it's just that they are reluctant to pledge. They prefer to contribute in a different manner. And in this information technology age, we are learning to adjust to that. Within the next month you will be able to contribute to the church on-line.

But back to our Stewardship Program for next year, and how can faith come into play into budget building and our annual stewardship program? Let me try to outline the principal components.

- 1.) First of all, the Stewardship committee is asking that you have faith in the leadership of this church as they build and vote on a budget for 2012, our Centennial Year. Our leadership will be responsible. It will take into consideration fiscal realities as well as being responsible Christians who choose to reach out and serve others. The budget for 2012 will be initially developed by the Finance Committee and then presented to the Church Council for their action at its next meeting, November 30.
- 2.) Second, when you make your pledge you will be asked to enter into a covenant with the entire church. You will pledge to make possible the church budget. This means that while you may pledge a static amount (as opposed to a percent of income), you will also be pledging that your giving may be adjusted up or down depending on the churches need as the year progresses. How will you know the need?
- 3.) Third, the Finance Committee covenants with you to keep you current next year with a simplified monthly report on how we are doing. A simple one page sheet showing income and expenses and the bottom line will be made available. (If you are one that wants more detailed information, the traditional detailed reports will also be available).
- 4.) Fourth, because we are trying to exercise faith as a local church community on November 20 at our annual Thanksgiving/ Giving Thanks combined 10:00am Worship Service (followed by a free lunch) you will be encouraged to sign a Covenant. When you make out your commitment card, there will be a statement of covenant; but you will also be asked to sign an identical public covenant when you offer your pledge at the altar. The covenant is agreeing to underwrite the exercise of ministry of this church through its budget.

- 5.) And one more thing. When you make your pledge, or covenant – you will be asked to put it in an envelope that is addressed to you and seal it. Deliver it to the altar, sign the public covenant. Sometime during the latter part of next summer your sealed pledge will be mailed back to you as a reminder of your covenant with the church. It will never be opened by anyone in the church. Your word, your covenant with the entire church community is the act of faith.

This program is designed to put faith in action. The stewardship committee is made of people that are long-time church members and people new to the church. And as one member put it, “This program is just crazy enough that it might work!” I can guarantee that it will work – at least as well as our previous programs – all it requires on your part is that you have faith and you put your faith into action!

Well back to the issue of servant hood. You may recall that some minutes ago I began this sermon talking about the greatest among you will be your servant. Not just “a” servant; but “your” servant.

Deb gave me a book mark last summer which helps embody this notion. The bookmark has these words from St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” It also says, “The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today.”

There is a story of a man who arrived in 1953 at the Chicago railroad station to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He stepped off the train, a tall man with bushy hair and a big mustache. As the cameras flashed and city officials approached with hands outstretched to meet him, he thanked them politely. Then he asked to be excused for a minute. He walked through the crowd to the side of an elderly black woman struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to the bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then Albert Schweitzer turned to the crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting. It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, “That’s the first time I ever saw a sermon walking.”

There is one more quotation from St. Francis of Assisi that sums up all that I am trying to say today: “Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you **nothing** that you have received – only what you have given.” These are words for us who strive to be great; words for us as we welcome new members; words for us as we make our stewardship commitment; words that embody that “the greatest among you . . . will be your servant.”

“Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received – only what you have given.”