

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
October 21, 2012
Sermon by Rev. Marsha Vollkommer
“Not to Be Served, but to Serve”
Text- Mark 10: 35-45

When I preached back in August we were in the middle of what I referred to – tongue in cheek – as the bread chronicles: five Sundays of Gospel readings about Jesus as the Bread of Life. This morning’s reading is part of a trilogy, which is (in all seriousness) known as the “Passion predictions.” In three consecutive chapters of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus predicts his coming death and resurrection...and the disciples don’t understand...and Jesus finds another, simpler, way to deal with their concerns and answer their questions. Lest we judge them as incredibly dense, be reminded that we are privileged to know the resurrection story. The disciples – at this point – did not.

And so, when Jesus says, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering” and Peter (in fear, no doubt) tries to contradict him, Jesus instead tells the disciples that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” And when Jesus says, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again,” and the disciples still do not understand, he tells them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Last week we heard Jesus say that he would be handed over to the authorities, that they would mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he would rise again. So what did we hear today??? We heard James and John really pushing the envelope when they confided in Jesus that they *probably* deserved to be awarded the seats of honor when Jesus came to glory...that when the time came surely they would be the ones who should be getting the Olympic Gold, the Heisman Trophy, the Oscar of discipleship. And, good grief! When the other ten disciples heard about this, they were frantic...they didn’t even know there was a contest going on!

Ever wonder if Jesus was prone to slapping himself on the forehead at times like this? Or engaging in a little dramatic eye-rolling? However he vented his frustration – and surely he must have felt frustrated! – in today’s passage, as in the others, perhaps he took a deep breath or counted to ten because he said, “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.”

The point of these Passion predictions and the simpler messages Jesus’ is led to share – these three stories of Jesus gently telling his closest followers that soon he will die and be taken up again with his Father in heaven, which they could not comprehend – is not meant to disparage the disciples. The point is instead, I think, to provide the disciples with some firm ground on which to stand in this life, rather than worrying about (and jockeying for) some imagined position – some power – some personal glory – down the road. It is about helping them to comprehend HOW they have been invited to participate in God’s kingdom – a kingdom already given to

them – and to all creation – and to you and me – all the position and power and glory we will ever need, given through God’s grace.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus speaks of servant and slave. In our time and culture there are so many mental images evoked when we think about servants and about slaves. Not too many of them – any? – are particularly pleasant – especially when we realize that servant and slave are what Jesus calls us to be. And not only is this the call...Jesus reminded his disciples that he, himself, came not to be served but to serve. There is an interesting twist that runs through all the Passion prediction stories and runs right up to our doorstep – that we are already servants and slaves in a myriad of misguided ways...if we only admit it. We give slavish attention to the lives of celebrities, sports figures and politicians. The proliferation of reality shows on television would say that we give slavish attention to the lives of those more outlandish than we...perhaps to the end that watching others behave and live in embarrassing ways makes us feel better about ourselves. Too easily we become servants at the table of consumerism and ego, letting someone else, somewhere else determine what we want and what we need in order to be healthy, happy and successful (probably all to that “someone else’s” financial gain). We lose track of the basic and elemental reality that we are called to serve only one Master – be slave to the love of only One, the God and Father of us all. And that we do so not to enrich God, but to enrich God’s kingdom on earth, right here, right now. Living as slave and servant to the work of God’s kingdom is not punishment, it is reward. Living as slave and servant in God’s kingdom does not earn us anything – the gift has already been given us. Living as slave and servant in God’s kingdom is our chance to humbly and gladly say thank you.

For a long time I have been looking for an opportunity to introduce you to a young man (well, at least “young” to most of us) from Philadelphia. It is a no-no in sermon-writing to try and shoehorn something in “just because” and yet I feel like perhaps today is the day. If Shane Claiborne walked into Grace Church this morning, we would all probably draw a collective gasp. He doesn’t look like one of us. Tall, thin, with a pointy beard and two-foot dreadlocks pulled back with a bandana, his “clericals” (and I do use quotes) are made by Carhart. Born and raised in evangelical eastern Tennessee, he made his way to Princeton Theological Seminary. While there, he had a full-blown crisis of faith – the dark night of the soul, we like to call it. He did not lose his faith in God. He lost his faith in the church’s faithfulness to God’s purpose. Fully cognizant of the fact that mainline Christianity seemed to be losing its “draw” (if you will), he found himself questioning how the beauty and truth of the incarnate Jesus could be so poorly represented by His church. He saw in the behavior of Christians the very thing that was turning people away from religion – he saw Christians behaving more like those disciples in Mark’s gospel...seeking after the assurance of power, recognition, security and promise...rather than patterning their lives after the Son of God, the Son of Man.

At the ripe old age of twenty-one, Shane Claiborne gathered a few like-minded (like-hearted) followers of Christ and started an intentional community in the heart of the Kensington neighborhood in Philadelphia in 1995. Known as The Simple Way, these housemates (and the house they lived in) were not unlike the settlement houses of the early twentieth century. The participants made a covenant

to live among the “least of these” – and trust me...the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia had already been categorized as gone-to-hell-and-not-likely-to-come-back. Over the ensuing years, The Simple Way has seen people come and go, but the organization has been firm in its commitment to bringing health and safety and dignity and life back to the community, in Jesus’ name. The sign outside the abandoned church that they adopted reads: “How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?”

Claiborne’s intention was never to be “known” for what he does. Were it not for a book he wrote about The Simple Way, in order to raise funds for the rebuilding of several homes destroyed by fire, I might not be talking about him in Galena this morning. But Shane’s book – his idea – his passion – his life – his living faith – grabbed the attention of people across the country and around the world. Why? Because Claiborne and the other disciples at The Simple Way have rediscovered the servanthood and slavery that Jesus preached. They live, every day, the love of neighbor in the spirit in which it was commanded of all of us. They have, in the words of our silent meditation, both the heart and the hands of a servant. Shane Claiborne unabashedly calls himself a radical...just as Jesus was a radical in his own time. He reminds us that this Jesus was born in a stank manger in the middle of a genocide...that we are just as likely to find God in the streets as in the sanctuary...that God can redeem revolutionaries and prostitutes and tax collectors, the oppressed and the oppressors... that it is God who is saving some of us from the ghettos of poverty, and some of us from the ghettos of wealth.

I do not bring Shane Claiborne to your attention this morning because I believe we should aspire to do the things he has done. We are each called in our own unique way...called by God to serve in our own time and place with the gifts we have each been given. Only the ear of my own heart – of your own heart – can hear what God is calling us to do to serve in God’s kingdom on earth. Shane is but one example of someone who has opened completely to the possibility of working in and for and with Christ to build the kingdom...by willingly – and eagerly – setting aside all the other voices that call out for our attention, our time and talents, our servitude. And he did it by putting Christ – not Shane – first. Right here in our own congregation two weeks ago we dedicated three baskets of shawls and scarves knit in prayer for others. When I ask the person who was responsible for a large part of that work of love whether he would like to come forward for the blessing he replied, “Oh, no. This isn’t about me.” Christ – not Richard – first.

As we prepare to present ourselves at the Table this morning we will pray, just as we pray every week (and many times in between), asking our Father in Heaven that the kingdom may come, that God’s will may be done *on earth*. On earth, here and now, and tomorrow and the day after that. We ask for God’s forgiveness, for God’s aid in resisting temptation, and God’s protection against the evils of the world. And we pledge to our Triune God that all power and all glory, and indeed this very kingdom we live in, are God’s alone. As we are sent forth into the kingdom this morning...as we live in the kingdom each day – forgiven, fed, empowered and loved – we are restored to work in the world as humble servants of the God who suffered, died and rose again. We are restored to be in the world, offering ourselves up not to the powers that flow from greed or false glory, but to the love that flowed from the

heart of the servant Christ to all that God has made. With caring hearts and working hands we can love and serve the Lord we find in *every* brother and sister. Blessed are we that God in Christ is as patient with us as Jesus was with his disciples. Blessed are we of Jesus' constant but gentle reminder that we are present in God's kingdom on earth not to be served but to serve. Amen.