



Serving is Leading

October 17, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Twenty-first Sunday after
Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
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LORD: May Your Word only be spoken; and Your Word only be heard: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Earlier this week, Jamie, the kids, and I visited some dear friends at Concord Academy, where Jamie taught for a decade or so when our kids were younger. We had dinner at the dining hall there, and it was a reminder of what a great thing the dining hall was! Terrific food, great staff, all we could eat, and no dishes to wash. We sat there for quite some time reminiscing with our friends, after the serving line had closed.

Back when we were there every day, it was not unusual to see the dining hall manager there taking a turn one day in the dish window, where paid employees and student workers together rinsed dishes. On another day, the manager might be seen wiping down tables. On another day, she might be in the serving line, dishing up mac and cheese. Or she might be at her desk in her office, putting together a budget or ordering supplies. Or she might be taking a plastic bag of trash out to the dumpster.

Though she was the manager, and had responsibility for the entire operation, she never operated as though she was above any of the tasks that even her lowliest employees were responsible for. In fact, she performed them all herself. She was a servant leader.

Jesus says to his disciples this morning: “You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their leaders lord it over them. And their great ones are tyrants over them.” Jesus described the reality of his time. Remember that Israel was dominated by the Romans, the cruelest, most effective empire of the day. And even in our own day, so-called leadership is often exercised by domination, manipulation, and a desire for power and prestige. We can see this not only at the political level nationally and internationally, but in our work and personal lives. And not just among other people, but in ourselves as well.

The human ego is a powerful force, often it leads us astray. We resist mightily any force that would try to teach us another way. As if we needed it, the Gospel this morning reminds us again of the ways the disciples—and we ourselves—completely resist or willfully misunderstand Jesus’ teaching about the meaning of being a disciple, of what it means to follow a Messiah who will suffer, die, and rise again.

In fact, we get this reminder three times in Mark. And in the Gospels, when something happens three times, it means, pay attention. Do you recall earlier in Mark, the first time the Jesus lays out the pattern of death and resurrection for his follows, Peter resists, and Jesus calls him Satan? Jesus rejects the power of force and domination, and instead evokes the posture of the suffering servant.

You’ll recall when Jesus again describes the death and resurrection pattern of discipleship, how he catches the disciples arguing about who is the greatest? Jesus defines “greatness” as becoming “servant of all.”



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Today, the Gospel records for a third time the fallout from Jesus's declaration about the nature of following him. James and John openly jockey for proximity to Jesus, stuck in their traditional understanding of power. Jesus again tries to reorient them; nonetheless, predictably, the disciples again descend into bickering about the nature of status, power, and glory. And Jesus again returns to the theme of servanthood.

I like the way the writer Debi Thomas characterizes Jesus' engagement with James and John and their illusions about the true meaning of power and glory. [\(reference\)](#) The easiest way to describe the error of James and John is to contrast the demand they make of Jesus with the question Jesus asks them in return.

They say: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What they really mean is this: "We're entitled to something here, Lord. We're willing to wait patiently. We've sacrificed a lot to be your disciples. What's in it for us?"

In return, Jesus responds the way he always does. Not "Here's what I want," or "Here's what I'm entitled to." But rather, "I am here to serve. How can I serve you?"

James and John don't understand that service in the kingdom of God is not a "second-class means to a first-class end." Service is the end. Service is abundance. Service is power. Service is glory. Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all." The *only* path to success in Jesus's kingdom economy by surrendering our most cherished forms of entitlement. Jesus's definition of glory is not the accretion of privilege. It's not upward mobility or permission to guard, hoard, and multiply your own. Glory in God's kingdom is an exercise in subtraction. It's downward mobility. It's the generous and perpetual expending of oneself in love. [\(reference\)](#)

It can be a kind of death, a kind of suffering, this giving up of status and privilege. Not like the early Christians, and even in places today where openly following Jesus can literally cost you your life. Nonetheless, aligning ourselves with those on the margins, taking an unpopular stance, using our privilege and power to serve others' not our own interests can feel like loss.

And.

Jesus' promise is that through that kind of death and sacrifice, of giving up ego, of placing ourselves in the service of others, *we find abundant life, new life.* May we cling to, and live out, that promise. **Amen.**