

THE SECRET TO BEING A GREAT WAITER

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Year B), October 18, 2009

Text: Mark 10:35-45

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

What is the secret to being a really great waiter?

Jesus liked to use the image of a waiter to clarify what he was about, and what we are to be about.

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

One of our sister congregations in Indianapolis, Servants of Christ, uses for its logo the bowl of water and cloth that Jesus used to wash his disciples’ feet at that meal where he was the server. “Here is some bread for you. Here is wine for all of you.”

In Luke 17 Jesus describes his disciples as being like slaves who work all day in the field, then come in and put on our apron and serve our master his dinner. We get to eat and drink later. But our service comes before our being served.

“As I have done for you, so you should do for one another.”

Love, serve, wait, suffer—these are interlocking concepts that define each other for Christians. “Prefer one another,” Paul says in 1 Corinthians.

The secret to Christian vocation, the secret to being a Christian 24/7, lies in our understanding the relationship between serving and being served. Today’s Gospel is a wonderful opportunity to examine this relationship.

We all have several vocations. For most of us, the job we do is one vocation that defines us. Besides this, we are called to be good parents, spouses, children, friends, citizens—the list is as long as “all the things we do for one another.”

I had an interesting conversation many years ago with a Christian who spent his days at home trading pork belly futures. He had not thought about whether what he was doing was a Christian vocation, until after he had taught me about how it worked. Then he saw for himself that what he was doing could be seen as bearing the risk that others were afraid to bear, or could not bear, of what might happen down the road to the price of the pork they were raising now. Because he assumed the risk, someone else was able to enjoy a little more peace and security—and that person rewarded him by relinquishing some of the money they might have made by bearing the risk themselves. “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

And yet the same work could also be performed in quite a different manner. You could also use that position to rob others, by exaggerating the risk, inflating fears, and defrauding others.

But seeing your job as a Christian vocation does not just mean doing the right thing. It also means that your heart is in the right place. And sometimes, people just pretend. They do the right thing, but inside they are thinking only of themselves. I remember a passage from a James Clavell novel about Hong Kong—while the attendants in the hotel were smiling at the foreigner, they were inwardly cursing him.

The thing is—and this is what makes life a greater mystery than consubstantiation—the very touches that people have to use deceitfully to persuade you they have your interest in mind—are also the

touches that *are* evidence of true sincerity. You cannot see the heart—you cannot really tell the difference.

The job itself will not make you a good person. Jesus said once there are two kinds of shepherds. Some use the position of shepherd for personal gain—they are thieves and robbers, Jesus said. They're the kind who "take the loot and scoot." Jesus was not like that. He was the kind of shepherd who lives *and dies* for the sheep. He cares for the sheep, and they know his voice. Etc.

In today's Gospel we discover that even the vocation of *disciple* can be twisted into an opportunity for enrichment and glory. James and John seem to have succumbed to that distorted picture of their vocation. "Teacher, we want you to grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory." Translation: We're willing to put in the long hours and do all this walking and serve you truly, as long as *in the end* there is something for us.

Jesus said, "You don't know what you are asking for." And that was their problem. They conceived of life as a bargain. Everything was tit for tat. One hand washes the other.

Part of Jesus' answer really sounds that way, too. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." That sounds a little bit like a scheme. A trick. A "Stoops to Conquer" plan. Take a seat at the end of the table, *so that* you will get invited up higher. Act modest, *so that* others will praise you.

But that sort of bargaining is not what Jesus is about. He doesn't want us to "act good" for just a while, just long enough to deserve a treat.

There is a difference in Christian service, and it is subtle but it is shattering. Jesus Christ is the teacher, the model, and the means for us to become servants with a difference.

Jesus didn't just pretend that he would go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, suffer with us and for us all the way to the end—he did. He didn't just talk a good line, he actually died for for his friends, for our sake. In dying for us, he freely gave us everything he could give us of himself, just like a perfect servant.

Today, when we take Communion, Jesus serves us once again, giving his very body and his very blood in our service, taking on his own shoulders the risk and the burden and the consequence of all our sin. God serves us.

I went to a website where experienced waiters are able to offer their secrets for being good waiters and waitresses.

What was missing on the website was the "Jesus secret" to being a good waiter.

The advice I read was things like how to avoid offending the customers: "Don't call them 'you guys.'" How to please the customers: "Always be happy—even if you aren't." Strategies to maximize the tip: "When you bring the change, make sure there are some small and medium size bills, not just twenties."

Through everything I read, in all the different writers, there ran a common theme. It seemed a little sad to me, from the customer's perspective. The theme was: You, the waiter, are doing this *for yourself*, so that you can enjoy it and make a lot of money. *But you will need to convince the customer that you are doing it for them.*

No one on that website suggested that you should *really* be doing it for the sake of the customer. That was the impression you needed to give, they were aware. But while you are *acting* the role of the perfect servant, we all know you are really there to get good-to-fantastic tips so that you can have a really good life yourself.

Really great waiters, really great servants in any role, *are* able to convince you that they are doing what they are doing **because** their very being **is** tied up in their service of you. They would not rather be doing something else. They want nothing else. They are not just marking time until they can get their own. They are serving God by serving you. That was Jesus' secret to serving us, and it can be our secret as we serve others.

It is difficult. But in everything we do for others, it is important for us to see the other people as God's children, whom we serve for God's sake.

Although I love the fiction of Wendell Berry, I will not agree with him that this kind of service is mainly rendered in small towns and the countryside, by people with simple lives. It is my ministry's goal to make clearer to you, as urban people, that your complicated lives are also lives that can and must be lived within love. It is more difficult in the city. It is more difficult when you feel like a small cog in a big machine. But it is no less true. We can live in the city as people who barter our lives away for things we want to get, faking love and service of others; or we can love, and live as people whose lives are gifts from God, with which we have the pleasure of helping one another.

What could be better medicine for us, when we are tempted to live and work only for ourselves, than to come to the Lord's Table, and have the God who created heaven and earth say to us, "The body of my only-begotten son, given for you," and "The blood of my precious self, shed for you."

And then to know that the God raised him up and will raise us up and glorify us.

The secret to being a great waiter is this: Live for others; don't just act like it. Live your life as a servant, a wise and good servant."

And the secret within that secret is this: We have a seat, a very good seat, simultaneously and eternally, at the greatest table of all—where God waits on us. Amen.

