

By Jesus' Side

Please pray with me: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Every once in a while, the lectionary text for the day directly lines up with what's going on in the world or in a congregation. So here we have it today – a text about serving on a day when we are committing ourselves to serving. How about that?

We've brought together two annual events – God's Work. Our Hands and Bread for the World Sunday – into one day to commemorate our commitment to serve others as followers of Jesus. After our worship service, we'll have the opportunity to engage in a number of service and advocacy projects – we can put together buckets of supplies for emergency relief workers, organize a clothing closet, put together sock kits for our unhoused neighbors, do yard work, or offer letters to advocate for efforts to end hunger around the world. There are many opportunities to offer your hands and voices in service to others.

Giving ourselves in service to others is a central commitment of our faith tradition, which is why we have days like God's Work. Our Hands and Bread for the World Sunday. It is so simple, so straightforward – we serve because Jesus tells us to love God by serving our neighbor. That's it. Just like that. We show our love for God by serving our neighbors.

Something so simple should be easy to do, right? Something so straightforward should be easy to understand? But the seeming simplicity and straightforwardness of Jesus' words are what make it really challenging.

Or at least it's challenging for James and John. They've been walking around with Jesus for years at this point, watching him serve and heal people, hearing his teachings about the kingdom of God, and hearing several times that Jesus was going to suffer, die, and be raised again in three days. They've been seeing and hearing all of this and yet they ask Jesus to elevate them to seats of honor and glory, to Jesus' right and left. Their request almost makes a person think that they missed something – where, in all of his conversations with the disciples up to this point, did Jesus say anything about glory, or at least the glory the disciples would get for following him? I checked – it's not in there.

Instead, we hear Jesus teaching everyone about a kingdom where all expectations of how the world is supposed to work are flipped on their head. Little children are honored. The first are last, and the last are first. Women are regarded as equal to their spouses.

And now he says that whoever wishes to become great must become a servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all.

All of us have probably heard this many times – it’s probably on some “Top 10” Jesus quotes list on the internet - but just think about how nonsensical it must have sounded to the disciples in their time and in their place. The great are people who are served, not people who serve! Slaves are not first – they’re at the very bottom of the ladder! There’s no honor or greatness in being a slave!, they would say.

They might also say, as Peter did in last week’s reading, but Jesus, we’ve given up everything to follow you. We left our families, have walked so many miles, haven’t slept in the same place for more than a few nights at a time, don’t really have any money nor any way of making it. So, what are we going to get in return for all of these miles, all of these hours, all of this? Glory? Please? Well, maybe not now, but at some point?

But again, Jesus reminds them, and us, that there isn’t any real reward, no real honor or glory in following him, or in serving others in his name.

Or at least, no honor or glory in the way that our society would recognize. Think about it. We live in an achievement-oriented society, where you’re given value, status, and glory for your job. For who you know. For where you went to school. For how hard you worked to get to where you are right now. Hard work can be celebrated, and we can love our jobs and our alma maters, but they shouldn’t be used as the sole basis for how we value people and how we direct our energy and our lives.

Instead, as we’ve been hearing for weeks now as we’ve read through Mark’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t follow the ways that the power systems of his time operated, or the ways they operate today. In fact, he tells his disciples not to replicate the power structures of the world in their own midst! Jesus turns things upside-down by inaugurating a topsy-turvy kingdom in which the last are first and the first are last, where one becomes great through service to the other, and where the Son of Man, Jesus himself, came not to be served but to serve. Jesus sets us free from any expectations of glory for our discipleship or for our service.

And Jesus points us outward to be in service with and for our neighbors. Out of ourselves, out of our church buildings, out of any sense that we should be rewarded for our service or that it makes us greater than those we are serving or those who do not serve. Jesus points us out of ourselves to go into the world to freely serve others in his name. This is what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. **This is what it means to be by Jesus’ side in his glory.**

First Trinity and St. Matthews have a rich history of service and a continued commitment to it. And this is a commitment that we can carry with us into the future as we live into our vision of being one in mission, now in two locations. Many of our small groups this past week talked about ideas for ways that we can serve our neighbors in Penn Quarter and in Southwest. And there are so many! I’ve heard excitement around supporting the federal workers in the office buildings around our congregations, and people in and around the courts. I’ve also heard a desire to listen to folks in each neighborhood to hear what’s going on with them and how we can best partner with them to meet their needs. I’m confident

more ideas will arise that we can begin to explore more fully as we discern how God is calling us to love and serve our neighbors.

Today we get to serve our neighbors here and around the world in a variety of ways. And this service is rooted in and generated by love. It's the love that God first showed to us, the love that sent Jesus to the cross and raised him from the grave, and the love that we are called to share with others. We are made in love to serve others with love.

So let us participate in service today, confident in the one who made us to serve, who loves us, and who gave himself in service to others.

Thanks be to God, Amen.