

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “there is something we want you to do for us.” ³⁶ “What is it?” Jesus asked them.

³⁷ They answered, “When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left.”

³⁸ Jesus said to them, “You don’t know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?” ³⁹ “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. ⁴⁰ But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God who will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them.”

⁴¹ When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them all together to him and said, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. ⁴³ This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; ⁴⁴ and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.” (Mark 10:35-45, Good News Bible)

David Lose is a pastor, author, seminary president, and professor of preaching. I had the pleasure of sharing an Uber with him once, and he was just as thoughtful and engaging in person as he is on paper. I mention him because I want to begin today’s sermon with a cogent observation David Lose once made about this text from Mark. His assertion is this: **“you will always serve something or someone whether you know it or not.”**¹

It is a keen observation about the motives of human action. We have to acknowledge that everything we do is toward some end; every act is motivated by something. What drives us? What are we hoping for? What are we trying to achieve?

Take something as simple as having a snack. In that act, are we satisfying hunger, or are we just bored? Did we choose a particular food to help us build muscle, or burn fat, or reduce our cholesterol, or do we just forget all that and go for the carton of ice cream, because what we really need is some comfort after a particularly bad day? Whatever we do, in that action we have a motive – we are serving something or someone.

I think Lose is right that this is the perfect place to begin as we study this exchange between Jesus and the disciples. When James and John asked Jesus for the most coveted seats in heaven, what was motivating them? What were they seeking?

One answer is that they were status seeking. James and John wanted to be publicly called as out important people, who matter just a little more than everyone else. At any event, the seats next to the host are the best seats in the house, reserved for the most valued guests. This was clearly the motivation assumed by the other apostles, and they did

¹David Lose, “Pentecost 21B: Who Will You Serve?” <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/10/pentecost-21-b-who-will-you-serve/>

not at all appreciate what they saw as a self-interested bid by James and John to elevate themselves above the other disciples.

Let's face it, much of the giving that we do is not completely selfless. Generosity can certainly be motivated by the desire to help others, but there are more selfish reasons, too. Just think of some of the great historical philanthropy that has benefitted New York City. Beloved spaces and institutions like Carnegie Hall, Rockefeller Center, and the Frick Museum were all created by gifts from men who could be described as "robber barons," tycoons who amassed great wealth through means that were not always honorable. And yes, they gave something back to help society, but they also got some great publicity and some pretty sweet tax breaks, not to mention putting their names on landmarks that have endured for generations.

When we give, when we act, what or whom are we really serving? Jesus was aware that motivations for giving can be a mixed bag, which is why he taught, very openly, that we need to be careful about our motivations. *"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them,"* Jesus says. *"Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. ... [Instead,] when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*²

Another reason we may give a gift or do a good deed is to earn some points with God. Maybe we are not so concerned about getting credit from humans as we are hoping for some credit in heaven. Maybe we are trying to assuage guilt... to make up for something bad we have done... or maybe we are just imagining the big scoreboard up in heaven and we want to add a few points for the home team. Again, this is not worth much in the eyes of God. Our Reformed tradition has always rejected the idea that we can earn our way to heaven with good deeds. We believe they are important, but not because of any "heaven credits" we may be awarded. Good deeds are valuable because selfless acts of generosity and service are a mark of someone whose heart is truly with God. They are evidence of real, authentic discipleship.

Last, but certainly not least, is a motivation that might not occur to us so readily. What if the reason that James and John sidled up to Jesus and asked for prime seats with him was based not so much on greed, but instead based on fear? What if the motive was not self-interest, but self-preservation?³ We didn't read this part of the text, but in the gospel story, right before James and John ask this favor of Jesus, Christ has issued, for the third time, the dire and terrifying prediction that, when they get to Jerusalem, he will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. He will be mocked and ridiculed, he will be spit on, he will be flogged within an inch of his life, and then he will be executed. Think about how frightening this must have been to hear. The thought must have occurred to them: if that is what they will do to Jesus, then what could happen to me?

If all that was about to go down, if the battle was about to turn that violent and that dangerous, where would you want to be? I'll tell you where I would want to be – I would want to be standing next to the biggest, baddest soldier in the group, because that would

² Matthew 6:1-4.

³ Charles L. Campbell, "Mark 10:35-45: Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 191.

have to be the safest place. Maybe that's why James and John wanted to assure themselves that, when things got real, they would be close to Jesus.

Whatever we do, in every action, we will always be serving something or someone, whether we know it or not. So, when James and John make a bid for places of honor, and everyone else gets all riled up at the gall and hutzpah it took for them to do something that seemed so self-interested, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach about a different kind of motivation – a way to serve a greater purpose. “I know the way human beings think,” Jesus says. “I know the way the world keeps score. But I want something different from you. From now on, if one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve.”

In a previous chapter of my life, I was a member of Rotary International. Some of you have likely been Rotarians, and if you have, you will remember their simple motto: “Service Above Self.” The one who profits the most in life, they say, is the one who serves best. These principles guide the daily lives of Rotary’s 1.4 million members, in more than 46,000 clubs around the world, and they are 100% founded on the words of Christ we have read today: that the greatest among us is the servant of all... that Christ came not to be served, but to serve others, even to the point of humiliation, ridicule, torture, and death on a cross.

Service above Self.

If we are honest with ourselves and with God, all of the motivations for giving and serving that I have mentioned so far end up serving ourselves just as much, if not more, than they serve God or other people. Seeking special status or personal gain, getting tax breaks, trying to gain points in heaven, trying to protect ourselves or insure our own safety, these things do not put service above self.

And this is where we get to the key point of the morning – the point that separates the kind of “Service Above Self” that Rotarians and corporations do from the kind of service above self that the Church of Jesus Christ seeks to do, that disciples of Jesus Christ are called to do. The important distinction is in *the why*. No matter what we do, we will always be serving something or someone... there is always a motivation. And what is the motivation for serving others in the name of Christ? Why do we practice service above self in the church?

The answer is simple: we do it because we want to follow Christ. We prioritize service with passion and conviction because the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is a God who serves... a God who is willing to empty himself out in loving service to others. This selfless willingness to pour himself out was mandatory, Jesus said. It *had to happen*, so that Jesus could then be filled back up with the highest and best aspects of God... so he could be resurrected... reborn... renewed... elevated... and ultimately glorified.

Do you see how this is so much more than just “doing good” or “being nice”? To live this way is an embrace of the call to be a disciple of Christ, not out of selfish interest or self-preservation, but as an act of faith and trust and conviction that if we can live this way, then we will start to become more like him. And that is the prize. That is the reason. That is the motivation.

Whatever we do, we are serving something or someone. May Christ and his cross be that for us. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*