

The Goal of Our Community: Serving Christ as our Purpose *Christian Community: Life and Ministry Together*

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Mark 1:16-20; Mark 12:28-34
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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This week, we are continuing into our Lenten sermon series, *Christian Community: Life and Ministry Together*. Last week, we began by starting with how the center of the Christian community must be Jesus Christ; not our opinions, not our ideals of what a church should be, but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Last week, in a sense, we looked inward to the center of the church, where we find Christ as the center. This week, we look forward to the goal of the church, the purpose of the church, and we want to talk about *servicing Christ* as the purpose of the church. Christ is the center, Christ is the goal. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, he is the beginning and the end. And the crucial nuance about this is that *servicing* Christ is the purpose. Cultivating a heart of service as we follow Jesus is absolutely crucial.

And what we can find is that both words of “*servicing Christ*” can be challenging for us. As we saw last week, having *Christ* at the center is challenging because our natural instinct is to put ourselves and our own agendas at the center. The gospel, however, teaches us to decenter ourselves, and to center ourselves on Jesus. But it is also the case that *servicing* Christ can be challenging, because we’d like to be the ones who are in control, who are deciding what to do, where to go, what should happen, rather than placing ourselves in the position of a servant.

The heart of being a disciple of Jesus, of being the church of Jesus, is to take our orders from Jesus, to follow Jesus, to be a servant of Jesus, and when we read the gospels, what *servicing* Jesus always means is *servicing* others, especially those who are in need. Gospel texts like our reading from Mark 12 make clear that loving God is fulfilled by loving our neighbors as ourselves. And when we track Jesus closely through the gospels, what *servicing* others regularly means is moving towards the ones who have become outcasts – the demon-possessed, the sinner, the prostitute, the tax collector, the Roman centurion, the ones who were despised by the good and righteous people of the day. Now we may understand why people have been outcast, they may have done, or may be doing, things that are horrible. But even when society has turned some people into being outcast and shunned and despised, they are still beloved children of God, and they are still people for whom Christ died.

This is why, for a number of years – and this is something I learned from my father – I have been opposed to the death penalty, which is set to be abolished in Virginia, because all of us, including those who have done hateful and horrible things,

remain beloved children of God and must be dealt with as such. There is room, and there can be a necessity, for opposing others' actions and views and positions, but there is no room whatsoever for contempt for another. There is no room for looking down on someone else as a lesser human being. "I am the foremost of all sinners," says the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy. One of the most liberating, and the most demanding, understandings we can have is that *the ground at the foot of the cross is level*. We are all on level ground when we stand before the crucified Christ. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. You and the person whom you are tempted to idolize and put up on a pedestal, level ground before Jesus. You and the person you think is a moron or a loser or a monster, level ground before Jesus.

In Mark 9 (which we did not read today), we are told that, as the disciples were making their way, they had an argument with each other about which one of them was the greatest. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that "no Christian community ever comes together without this argument appearing as a seed of discord. No sooner are people together," Bonhoeffer writes, "than they begin to observe, judge, and classify each other." This argument, he says, "is enough to destroy a community."

If he is right, then we would do well to reflect on how easily this kind of argument can come up in the congregation, in our own hearts, and in our wider community, how easily we can find ourselves engaged in this kind of thinking about who is better, who is greater. What we may notice is how good we can be at diagnosing this tendency in *others*; how others think that *they* are greater, that *they* are better Christians, that *they* are more faithful disciples. We may think, "Yeah, they're just being like those early disciples."

What may be hidden a little better from us are the ways that *we* can do that. The ways that we can think of ourselves in the one-up position, in the justified position, where we are God's gift to the congregation, where we are the faithful ones, where we are the core around which the congregation's future should be built. Us, not those people. When that happens – and if you're anything like me, that kind of thinking can always be crouching at the door – we need to realize that what we're doing is trying to prevail in the argument about who is the greatest.

Whenever we, or others, fall into this argument, this competitive argument, we are operating out of our own ego, rather than out of the mind of Christ. We will be trying to build Christian community on self-justification, which promotes and glorifies the self, rather than on justification by grace, which attends to and serves the needs of others. Self-justification is driven by an underlying anxiety about defending the self, whereas justification by grace sets us free from worrying about whether we are good enough, so that we can have the spaciousness and freedom of heart to serve others, to listen and to be present to the pain and the suffering of others.

Bonhoeffer again writes, 'Once individuals have experienced the mercy of God in their lives, from then on they desire only to serve. The proud throne of the judge no longer lures them; instead they want to be down among the wretched and lowly, because God found them down there themselves.'

"Come and follow me, and I will make you fish for people," Jesus says. "Love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself." These commands, these invitations from Jesus, that Carol read for us this morning, call us to a life of following Jesus by serving others, serving Christ by loving others. "Loving and serving God by responding to human need," as Lewinsville's WHY says it. That is the purpose of Christian community, the purpose of the church.

In a time when we have seen the almost incomprehensible number of half a million people who have died from COVID-19 in our country, serving Christ and serving others will mean sitting with the grief that is generated by that kind of massive loss. In a time of political polarization, serving Christ and serving others will mean articulating our own thinking as clearly and as persuasively as we can, standing for what we believe to be right, and it will mean listening for understanding to those who see things differently, and asking God to help us love those whom the world teaches us to see as unlovable.

Serving Christ and serving others is not for the faint of heart. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "If you love those who love you and make you feel good, what's the big deal in that? Even the tax collectors can do that! And if you only greet and hang out with those who are like you, for goodness' sake, even the Gentiles do that!"

The heart of service is a transformed heart; it is a softened heart, but it is also a more resilient heart than the heart of competitive control, which is always trying to justify itself. The heart of service is a heart that has been set free from its need to justify itself, so that it can see and respond to the suffering of others.

Where in our congregation do you see the need to cultivate this heart of service? And again, if you're anything like me, you'll be able to see this in others more quickly than you can see it in yourself. So during this Lent, where in yourself do you need to cultivate the heart of service, a heart that serves Christ, and that serves Christ by serving the needs of others who are members of Christ's family? To God and to God alone, be all the glory, honor, and power, now and forever. Amen.