

How Are You Doing as a Servant of Christ?

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading for today follows the transfiguration which included the big three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John. When they left the mountain of transfiguration on which Jesus was adorned in glory, they proceeded to Capernaum. Jesus was making a transition in His work. He had been teaching and performing miraculous acts in front of masses of people. He was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that He was the Messiah. But now in all four Gospels, Jesus changes His focus. He began to seek solitude away from the great crowds of people. He knew what was ahead for Him. So He began to prepare for that journey and its end – the entire purpose for His life on earth.

Part of that preparation was His need to prepare His disciples for His upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. And to prepare them to be the leaders of His church on earth. He had already told them, but once again He tells them exactly what is ahead. He will be arrested and killed. He will die but after three days He will rise from death. Wouldn't you think that such astounding and shocking news would have been important to His disciples? Wouldn't you think they would have asked Jesus to explain? Wouldn't they have asked questions? But they didn't according to St. Mark because they were afraid to ask Jesus questions.

Instead what actually happened is something like what happened in this story...A person was told by a doctor that they had an incurable disease. The disease is fatal. The person only has a short time to live before they die. The doctor described in detail how the disease will progress and how it will rob the person of their very life and how painful a process that would be. The person leaves the doctor's office and goes home. They tell their family and closest friends what

is going to happen to them. They relate to them exactly what this disease is going to do, when they will die, and how they will face pain and suffering until death comes.

And what is the reaction from the family and friends of this news? They start to argue amongst themselves. One of the children says, *"I'm the oldest so I should get all the antiques and the house!"* Another says *"No, I was always the favorite, so I should get them along with the house and you'll be lucky to get a few bucks!"* Yet another says *"No, no, no, you are all wrong. I live nearby and you don't. I have been taking care of them all along because I am nearby and I will probably have to take care of them in their illness just like I have been doing all along. I'm going to get everything because you two never came and helped out!"* I think we all agree that this should NOT be the reaction of someone who just poured out their heart regarding what they were about to face. How painful to listen to your children argue over which one is the greatest or will receive the biggest reward, right after you have told them you are going to die and the details about it. We'd condemn such action as absolutely out of line! Rude, insensitive. Just some of the words that come to mind over such behavior.

But that is exactly what happened with Jesus and His disciples. Jesus foretells His upcoming passion, His suffering, and death. He told His disciples how He was about to fulfill His Messianic office by suffering and dying for the sins of the world. He says ***"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed after three days he will rise."*** (v. 31b) Jesus was pouring out His heart. He was telling them what He is destined to do as the long-promised Messiah. You might expect the disciples to be saddened or shocked by this announcement by Jesus. Our Teacher is going to be harmed, and suffer? You would think they'd be in agony over this.

Now they were sinners like you and me. Perhaps, there was some envy by the nine disciples who were not on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus and saw His glorification. Nevertheless, this happened.

Now, it is easy for us where we sit to be critical of the disciples, but we must remember we have the benefit of hindsight. Every Sunday, every church festival day, every Christian wedding, every Christian funeral, pastors proclaim the crucifixion of Jesus for the sins of the world. This is the Gospel that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten son...His death and resurrection were for us and guarantees us salvation and life eternal through faith in Him. But remember, the people of Jesus' time were not looking for a spiritual savior; they were looking for a political savior. It is all a matter of perspective.

It reminds me of this story. A young child dies and goes to Heaven. He is at the Pearly Gates and is met by St. Peter himself. However, the gates are closed as the child approaches the gatekeeper. St. Peter said, *"Well, Ian, we have heard a lot about you. Unfortunately, heaven is filling up fast, and we have been giving everyone an entrance exam for everyone who appears here. The test is short, but you have to pass it before you can go into Heaven."* Ian said, *"Nobody ever told me about an entrance exam. I sure hope the test isn't too hard. I'm not very good at tests."* St. Peter continued, *"It'll be okay. It is only 3 questions. First, what two days of the week begin with the letter 't'? Second: How many seconds are there in a year? Third: What is God's first name?"* Ian pondered the questions and said he needed some time to think about his answers. He left and came back the next day. Seeing St. Peter, he waved to him and said, *"Well, I have thought over those questions and I think I know the answers. The answer to the first questions was easy. There are two days of the week that begin with the letter 't' – Today and Tomorrow."* St. Peter's eyes opened wide and he exclaimed, *"Well, that isn't what I was thinking but you do have a point, and I guess I didn't specify what I meant so I will accept your answer. How about the second question? How many seconds are there in a year?"* Ian paused and said, *"Well, that was a lot harder. But I worked hard to get the answer and it is 12."* St. Peter is astounded. He says, *"12? 12? How in Heaven's name did you come up with 12 seconds in a year?"* Ian responded, *"Well, it took some time but after I while I got it. There is January 2nd, February 2nd, March 2nd, and so on for 12 months. So, there are 12 seconds in a year."* St. Peter replied, *"Wait a minute,*

that is not where we were going with this, but I have to admit, I see your point and I'll have to give you credit for that answer too. Now, what about the third and final question? Can you tell me God's first name?" Ian said, *"Sure. It's Andy."* *"Andy?"* St. Peter shouted in total frustration and exasperation. *"Andy? I can see how you came up with the answers to the first two questions but just how did you come up with the name Andy for the first name of God?"* Ian responded, *"Well, it wasn't that hard. It was the easiest one of all the questions. I learned it from a song in church. 'Andy walks with me; Andy talks with me. Andy tells me I am his own....'"* St. Peter opened the gate to heaven and said to Ian, *"Welcome to heaven."*

Even the expectations of a saint at the gates to heaven can be completely opposite of what actually happens. That was the case with Jesus' disciples. Their expectation was totally wrong about what to expect from Jesus and His Kingdom. There was nothing conventional about who Jesus was. He was not a King of this Earth. He was not a messiah who would restore the glory and power of the ancient Kingdom of Israel as it was in its Golden Age under King David and King Solomon. They misread the implications of the Transfiguration. The glory that was to come for Jesus was from horrendous suffering and death. They were arguing and jockeying for positions of importance in His Kingdom as they saw it. They were totally wrong in their assumptions and expectations. They were acting out of selfishness and pride. The only thing they had right was that Jesus was the center of it all. The rest was all wrong. But at least they were all consistent in their misunderstanding.

Jesus used this total misguided thinking as a teaching moment for them and us. He took a child in His arms and told His disciples and us to serve the child. He told them that the one who will be first has to assume the role of the last. To serve others in humility is the measure of greatest in the Kingdom of God. Now, women and children had no real status in the culture of Jesus' time. When He selected a child as the example for servitude, He selected the lowliest of society. You don't welcome a child into your arms because of how that child can help your career advance. You don't take a child up in your arms because that will give you status or

recognition in the community. You welcome a child out of love. And remember that is one of the ways we define who God is. God is love. So, receiving a child in His name is accepting that child in love.

Even today, children are not glorious in the eyes of the world. Their support requires a lot of their parents' time, talents, and treasures. A child needs to be supported, needs to be served, to survive and grow up. To receive a child means that you have to physically get down to their level to pick up that child, give of yourself, to care for a child. None of that is glorious in the eyes of the world. When you think about it, through the centuries, childcare has not been considered a glorious occupation. Motherhood or fatherhood are often considered to be a burden by society instead of a great occupation. Often, it is passed off to surrogates. And why? Because servanthood is involved. It means giving of yourself to serve the needs of someone else who can't meet their own needs.

This business of serving someone else is completely foreign to our definition of greatness. So, we have to confess this morning that this is a concept with which we have a hard time too, as Christians living in the 21st century. Greatness is not measured by stinky diapers, cleaning up vomit, or making a trip to the doctor in the middle of dinner. Greatness in our culture is measured by popularity, wealth, being number one in whatever we do. It is having the best car, the best grades, the best house, the best clothes, the most adoring friends, the best looks.

Now, when Jesus was talking about servanthood and using the example of a child, He was implying all those who are in need and the requirement to serve them. People who are poor, sick in body, mind, and spirit, orphaned, unclothed, dying, and desperate. He punctuated his statement with the words, ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.”*** Even in His example, Jesus humbles Himself before God, His Father. By choosing a child in this manner, Jesus was emphasizing to all of us that we are to serve, to make ourselves last, as we serve others who are seen as the last

who would be served. And Jesus served as our example. Jesus humbled Himself in service for you and me.

Jesus was God, the Son of God, but as the one who was First, He stooped down to be the last and willingly accepted the punishment for our sins that we deserved even though He was sinless. In doing so, Jesus was the last and the least human on earth who was covered with the slime of sin and subsequently was abandoned by His Father. He died but the Father recognized His service to humankind and raised Him from death. Then, God took Him from being last to being the First at His right hand. And that was an honorable position that the disciples were arguing with each other about. Each of them wanted to be right there with Jesus. But would they want to pay the price?

Now, being first does no good unless in your heart you put God first. Jesus is not saying here that we should not act to excel in our lives. Being excellent, as humble Christians and acknowledging God as the source of our success and the means to it makes us His servant and brings Him the glory.

How are you doing as a servant of Christ? Is your life an example of Cassius Clay (aka Mohamed Ali) who said, *"I am the Greatest?"* A man who went from three-time heavyweight boxing champion of the world to being crippled by Parkinson's disease. Or is your life an example of Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, in English, Agnes Behrni (aka Mother Theresa of Calcutta), who devoted her life in service to the poor and sick of India? And was made designated as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church five years ago on September 4, 2016.

What questions apply to your service? Are you a willing servant of Christ? Do you serve because you seek to share God's love with others or to seek the notice and approval around you? Do you get angry when those you serve and/or those around you fail to acknowledge or recognize your service? Do you serve with all your heart or is your service only skin deep?

In His servitude to all humans, including you and me, Jesus was repaid by those He serves here on earth by being whipped and

nailing to a cross. Nevertheless, He served perfectly. He did not serve us for fame or fortune or recognition in this world. He served us because of His love for each of us which was an extension of the His Father's love. He deserved to be first among us but He allowed Himself to be last so we could be first. For His obedient servitude, God rewarded Him by making Him first.

And Jesus did not stop being our servant after His death, resurrection, and ascension. He didn't abandon us in this world when His work of salvation was completed and He had received His reward at the right of God. He continues to serve us today. He daily forgives us our sins when we confess and repent. He did so this morning. He serves us with His Word as we hear, read, and study Holy Scriptures. He continues to guide us and lead us in our temporal life by His recorded words. He serves us with His life-giving body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine which we are about to receive in the Sacrament of the Altar. He serves as our mediator with the Father when we call on His name in prayer. He serves us by preparing a place for us in Heaven at the end of our days when He calls us home to Him. Finally, when the LAST day comes, He will serve us with a new, holy body that will rise from death just as He rose from death. Jesus is the first but still demonstrates to us how to be the least as our servant.

Being a servant was Jesus' measure of greatness. He was and still is the perfect servant. He has called each of us to be His own and as His own, He has called us to serve Him. We are His servants on earth. How do you see yourself in your servant role? Serving as the least and not the first. Serving as a disciple of Jesus in humility and gratitude for His service to you.

Remember the story about Ian? Remember those test questions he had to answer to get into heaven? If you look in the 23rd Gospel of Matthew, Jesus posed some questions in a discourse on entering heaven. ***"When did we see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you? Or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?"***

You know the answers for yourself and they don't have to be known by others around you (your actions will serve that purpose). But the answers are known to God and our verbal response is unnecessary to Him because He has seen our life and He knows our servanthood.

Like Ian, we all want to be admitted to heaven. We want to pass the test. We want to hear the words, ***“Well, done, good and faithful servant” “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”***

Jesus spoke these words to each of us, ***“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*** Jesus showed us what it means to be great. Our lives as Christians should model His by being lives of humble service. We are called not to be served but to serve. By the power of the Holy Spirit, ponder the words of Jesus in light of your life. But especially, ponder the servitude of your Savior in His service to you and your response to Him. In this church, in your marriage, in your family, in your school, in your workplace, in your community, in the world.

In His Name and to His glory alone. Amen.