

Grace Episcopal Church, Amherst
October 18, 2009

The Rev. Ann P. Wood

“Servanthood”

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be now and always acceptable to you, our Lord and our Redeemer. AMEN

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“Among you, whoever wishes to be great will be your servant, and among you, whoever wishes to be first will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many”

As I was driving home from church last Sunday, with the sun shining on the stunning foliage around me and beautiful cloud formations above, I was thinking about The Rev. Catherine Munz’s sermon and what a hard act hers would be to follow. Then it occurred to me that Cat’s gifts aren’t my gifts and mine aren’t hers. So I can just be me! Thankfully, God made each one of us unique. Last week, Cat spoke of our giving money back to God in praise and thanksgiving, for the many blessings that God showers upon us. Today, I’m going to talk about a different kind of stewardship – the service that we give with our individual gifts, passions and talents. What does it mean to be a servant? In what ways might we give our gifts back to our Lord? What are some of the ways that we serve God here at Grace, in our homes and in our communities at large?

But first, let’s just take a few moments to put the Gospel scene in context. The two preceding verses in Mark, which we didn’t hear today, tell us that Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. The disciples, Mark states, “were in a state of astonished bewilderment, and, as they followed him, they were afraid”. Jesus initially walked on ahead of them, thinking about his future. He called them to come closer and proceeded to tell them about what was soon to happen to him – his ridicule, death and

subsequent resurrection. The disciples didn't really understand this information about the man they loved, nor about God's Kingdom on earth. They were completely bewildered. What did they do with that bewilderment? James and John went to Jesus with a request. "Grant to us", they said "that, in your glory, we may sit one on your right hand and one on your left". These ambitious, status seekers, wanted to make sure that if something bad was really going to happen to Jesus, their future would be assured. They wanted to participate in Jesus' glory. Do you imagine that the rest of the disciples were pleased about these actions? Mark tells us that they "began to be angry". Here were two of their friends, trying to steal a march on them, as they sought to make sure that they would be the most important in God's kingdom. Fortunately, Jesus was aware of what was going on and seized the moment to teach them a lesson. He explained to them the differences between power and servanthood in the eyes of the world versus the idea of power and servanthood in God's Kingdom. "Among you, whoever wishes to be great will be your servant" he says, "and among you, whoever wishes to be first will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life, a ransom for many."

In our world today, people are considered powerful or important because they have money, fame, skills at sports, musical or dramatic talent, beauty or an ability to speak well. What a contrast between the standards of the world we live in and God's kingdom, where it is servanthood that makes one great.

What do we mean by servanthood? There seem to be three elements involved. FIRST is our willingness to accept the call of God to work for Him, no matter what circumstances surround us. The story of Naaman's wife's servant girl is an example,

which I'll come to in a moment. SECONDLY, is the WAY we serve and/or the gifts we use – whether we are mowing a neighbor's lawn, providing a meal when someone is sick, visiting a patient in the nursing home or simply listening to someone's story. In my role as a hospital chaplain, the latter is something I do quite frequently. THIRDLY, servanthood generally requires some kind of sacrifice. It takes time away from other things that we might prefer to be doing or from places we would much rather be. In Jesus' case, of course, it was his home, his honor, his comfort and eventually his life that he sacrificed. But out of that ultimate sacrifice, came hope for us all. His mother gave up her reputation and potentially her chance of marriage, when she willingly accepted God's call to serve as Jesus' mother.

Some other Biblical examples might include the Isaiah reading we heard this morning. This was a portion of the last of the so-called "Servant Songs". There's some question about who the servant is. Is it to Israel that reference is being made, or is it a prophetic reference to Our Lord? In either case, the Servant not only encountered and accepted suffering and death in the course of his work, he also became effective in the salvation of others. Whoever the original servant might have been, it's generally agreed that Christ was its fulfillment. We do not necessarily have to suffer and die in order to serve God, but we do need to become servants if we aim to become Christ-like.

I mentioned a moment ago, as an example of being available to accept God's call, the story of the young girl who served Naaman's wife. She was captured from Israel and joined the household of Naaman, an Aramean (or Syrian) army commander. Naaman suffered from leprosy. The young servant suggested to Naaman's wife that Naaman go visit Elisha who would, she was sure, cure her master. The results of the girl's actions

were not only that Naaman was healed, but they also brought about his religious conversion. The girl, rather than being a ‘nobody’, a slave captured in border wars, became an example of a savior by facilitating Naaman’s healing, helping the political relations between Syria and Israel, as well as showing the proud Syrians, the power of Yahweh.

Moses, of course, is the ultimate Old Testament servant leader. He cares for the people God has put under his care and guides them through all kinds of trials and tribulations – adventures that will ultimately take them to God’s Promised Land. Moses was in almost constant communication with God, who guided him in his actions. He also made sacrifices as a servant and leader. He fell from God’s graces in the wilderness of Zin, when he and Aaron failed to attribute to God, the miracle of a rock gushing forth water for the Israelites. Neither Moses nor his brother, Aaron, was allowed to enter the Promised Land.

When we take a further look at today’s Gospel text, possible meanings of the term servanthood become clearer. The Greek word used in the text is “diakonos”, which means a minister, or servant, and from which we get the word deacon. The English translation of ‘slave’, as in “whoever wishes to be first will be the slave of all” – isn’t really a good one, with its connotations of being owned by a master. Other translations use the word “minister” or “servant” instead. Diakonia” involves compassionate love towards the needy in the Christian community. Every business, every calling, when its labor, mission or purpose benefits another, is a “diakonia”. One wonderful example of diakonia we have in our liturgy, is the Maundy Thursday service. It’s one of my favorite services. I find something very special in washing the feet of a fellow parishioner and I

find something both special and humbling in having my own feet washed. The service gives me a sense of what it is like to serve, on one hand, and the need to be open to receiving service, on the other.

In my role as deacon, I serve the parish when I read the Gospel, set the Table for Holy Communion, pray for members of the congregation and take some responsibility for pastoral needs. At Cooley Dickinson Hospital, I serve both patients and their families, as well as staff, in my capacity as chaplain. I visit patients regardless of their station in life, their faith tradition (if any), their income or lack thereof. As I listen to a patient's concerns, I'm able to make him or her sense that I've really heard their stories. Sometimes this is a gift that is a new experience for people.

Robert Greenleaf, in his book "Servant Leadership" states that the best test to determine whether one is being a servant leader is one that is difficult to administer. He asks the questions: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

These seem to me to be difficult criteria to judge whether or not one is being a true servant. When I apply them to my own ministry, I find the questions difficult to answer: do the parishioners or patients I serve grow as persons? I suppose they might. Perhaps some might become "wiser, freer, or more autonomous". It's difficult to judge one's own ministry. Perhaps if we take a look at some of the servant roles performed by members of this parish, it becomes easier to see. One example that comes to mind, is the "Greening Grace" team. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, with her enthusiasm and love for planet earth, has inspired a team of people, who now share her enthusiasm and are helping us all

to consider God's charge to us in the Garden of Eden. In the Enriching Our Worship liturgy

(AT 8:00) which we are using at the 10:30 service,

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part of the communion prayer that we hear says: "You gave the world into our care that we might be faithful stewards and show forth your bountiful grace. But we failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; we would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation..." The "Greening Grace" team is helping to raise our consciousness on this score, is helping us to grow as persons and, I believe, if we follow their suggestions, we're becoming healthier and wiser.

Another example to which we can apply the criteria, is the mutual care team. Along with help from the Brother Lawrence Guild, they bring food to parishioners who, for whatever reason, need a little TLC in their lives. There are those who serve at the altar in various capacities, or sing in the choir, and those who faithfully write cards to those who are sick or bereaved.

In the community, there are those who help at the cot shelter, the food pantry, share the abundance from their gardens with others, or baby-sit a neighbor's child. Affecting the world at large, there are those who are concerned about our brothers and sisters in Haiti and those who serve as missionaries in far-off lands. The list could go on. I don't want to leave out any servant ministry – but I don't want to keep you here all morning either. I'm sure you get the idea.

Each one of us is capable of being a servant, of showing compassionate love towards the needy. Through the sharing of our unique, God-given, gifts and passions,

we're able to benefit our parish family and others in the community. We've no idea how many lives we may touch by our acts of kindness. The ripples may stretch far a-field - into our homes, our parish, the community and the world at large. Jesus said that he "did not come to BE served, but TO serve and to give his life a ransom for many". May we, like Moses, recognize through our prayers, opportunities to serve wherever we may be, in whatever capacity, and however humble. May we be good stewards of those unique gifts which God has given us, and with praise and in thanksgiving, give them back to God in whatever ways God may call us to do so.

AMEN