

Slave to All

^{NRS} **Mark 10:42** So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

^{NRS} **Romans 12:4** For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

^{NRS} **Colossians 3:11** In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

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George Bernard Shaw wrote the play *Pygmalion*, which became the film *My Fair Lady*. I never thought of George Bernard Shaw as a theologian until just recently, when someone quoted him as saying, "God made mankind in his image - and we have been returning the favor ever since!"

Shaw was observing that we have strong tendency to understand and picture God as being a lot like us. Caucasians hang up paintings of a Jesus who has Caucasian features and Asians and Africans sometimes portray Jesus with those ethnic features. Every now and then some major sports figure will make some sort of claim that if Jesus were here today, he'd be a linebacker, or a shortstop, or whatever. And nations go off to war, always declaring that God is on their side. We project our outlook and our priorities on Jesus, on God, on the kingdom of God, and on the church. I don't know how many times I've heard someone say, "The church needs to be run in a business-like fashion." Unfortunately, that statement is totally wrong.

A business should make a profit. It should aggressively seek ever-greater market share. It lobbies the government to seek either deregulation, or regulation that will give it some advantage with customers or advantage over competition. Good business people are driven, they are aggressive, exude confidence, and design their marketing to create not need, but want. The way to be successful is to minimize expenses and wages and charge all that the market will bear. One rises in business by standing out from the crowd, being an A type personality, and by being a powerful presence in the company. That's standard business tactics. I know. I took the courses. I have the degree. And I'm not knocking it.

But the church isn't business. The church is called to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world¹ - and it's called to be radically different from the world. Jesus pointed out this difference when he said, "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." Not dominate, but serve. That's not just different, it's radically different, it's the exact opposite of how much of the world around us functions.

There's a church in St. Louis that has a sign over the main door into the building and the sanctuary. It reads, "Servant's Entrance." It startles you the first time you see it. It's absolutely correct, but we've so imposed our cultural outlook on the church, that the true outlook catches us by surprise.

We all know the characteristics that are the hallmarks of the successful executive, the drive, the energy, the competitiveness, and the win-at-all-costs sort of focus. But Paul lists these attributes, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, generosity, humility, gentleness, and patience." In business, that would define the wimps, the losers, the also-rans, and the

¹ Book of Order, G-1.0200, The Great Ends of the Church

failures. As followers of Christ, as those who are walking in the way where he led, as the church, Christ's body, we are called to be different. We're challenged to think and live by different norms and different assumptions than the world around us. Instead of a dominating type A leadership, we're called to servant leadership. Instead of rugged individualism we're challenged to be a body of interdependent brothers and sisters. Instead of taking advantage of another's weak points, we're called to compassion. Instead of maximizing profits, we're called to share generously.

I'd like to share a couple of stories with you - examples of people who share generously. Some years ago I heard a speech given by a man named A. E. Hotchner. I'd never heard of him before that evening. It turned out that he was an author and a playwright. And he had a story to tell. He and a buddy of his started a company. Neither of them were businessmen, so they didn't know any of the rules about business. Instead of pocketing their profits, they foolishly gave them away. In 1988 they built a camp for children with serious illnesses and life-threatening conditions. More camps followed. 120,000 children have gone to these camps, all completely free. Their business kept growing despite their habit of throwing money away. At the end of each year they would write checks to charities and completely empty the company bank accounts. Then, the first week in January, they'd go borrow money to meet payroll. Since it was founded, *Newman's Own* has never made a dime of profit, but it has given over 270 million dollars to thousands of charities. A. E. Hotchner's buddy and partner, Paul Newman, died this year and the company continues to never make any profit.

In the passage today in Mark, Jesus tells us that whoever wishes to be great must be a servant, whoever wishes to be first of all must be the slave of all. Slave of all. That's really hard to swallow. We don't want to be a slave. I once spent a weekend with a man named Eugene Lang. Little guy. Old man. He lives in Manhattan in New York City. Rich guy, but not well known on the social circuit. He flies economy class. He grew up in Harlem back in the Great Depression. He was asked to come speak to the graduating class of the middle school that he attended decades earlier. He looked out at the crowd of students, black and brown; most of whom would never get through high school, and on the spur of the moment, he threw his speech away. He walked to the podium and did something completely unplanned. He had no idea what he was going to say until he began to speak. He promised every graduating student that he would pay their tuition at a state college, if they would finish high school and were accepted into college. He put himself under obligation, he put himself in bondage, he was slave to all of those kids. Today, there are *I Have A Dream Foundations* all across America and over 15,000 kids have been through the program a little old man started.

In the stewardship packets out on the table is a sheet of "Opportunities to Serve the Lord." It's a checklist of lots of ways that you can share your abilities and your time in fellowship and service, both within and outside this congregation. Don't underestimate the importance of this. There's so much that gets done behind the scenes. Cathy comes by to set up tables and decorate for fellowship night. Tom comes by to take the food to CCM. Don Osborne brings supplies for the Chili Cook-off and then puts them away for next year. Nancy refreshes the Jesus Kids bulletin board. Bill comes by and trims the pecan tree. Joe painted this poster. Folks prepare communion. The choir rehearses. A lot people give time here and there, using the abilities and aptitudes that God gave them, working behind the scenes for the benefit of this community that we call First Presbyterian Church.

In a similar fashion, we shouldn't underestimate the importance of fellowship. At covered dish meals we literally feed each other. At the same time we're each fed by the interest and love we share as we visit. Movie nights are great fun! They also give us the opportunity to reflect together on how our faith shapes how we see the world around us. The films provide examples of redemption, sacrifice, faithful living, and sometimes, pitfalls to avoid. In that respect, the Bible stories cover the same wide range.

Opportunities to serve God abound outside this congregation. If we only care for ourselves, then we are no more than a narcissistic body of some sort, but we certainly aren't Christ's body. Jesus spent little time in navel gazing. But we read constantly about his care for the condition of other people, teaching, feeding, healing, and comforting them. Led by his example, following in his footsteps, people in this congregation take meals to shut-ins, haul food over to the food pantry at CCM, volunteer their time at the food pantry and the medical ministries clinic and with hospice, serve meals to the hungry, work to

provide safe, decent, and affordable housing, give blood, and set up community gardens. Why do we do it? Because it is Christ's work, because he leads us to love our neighbor - just like we would wish to be loved. What comes as a surprise, is how this adds meaning and satisfaction to our own lives. As the Red Cross is fond of saying, "Donate. All you'll feel is good!"

It's easy for us to think of church as a place where we go to be comforted and refreshed, a place to get our spiritual batteries recharged. That's so valuable. The daily grind can wear us down and we need to be reminded that we can lean on the everlasting arms as the old gospel song put it. But the church is also where we learn to practice servant leadership, with each other and with our neighbor. It is here that the virtues of compassion, generosity, humility, gentleness, and patience are valued, sought after, practiced, polished, and appreciated. It's here, supporting each other in love and fellowship that we can learn and practice servant leadership. It's here that we can begin to express our gratitude for all that God has done for us by turning and offering God's love in service to each other and to our neighbors.

Pick up your stewardship packets out on the table. With joy and thanksgiving for all of your blessings, consider how you want to use your time and abilities in service to God by being in service to others. Fill out the form of "Opportunities to Serve the Lord." Don't assume that everybody knows what you want to do. Don't assume that what you've been doing in the past is what you will always do in the future. Consider stretching your horizons. Pray to know what gifts God has given you. Look for more ways to share your time and gifts with others. Then bring your pledge of abilities and time to worship next Sunday to offer them to the Lord. Amen.