

Not To Be Served

Psalms 22:1-18, Matthew 20:17-34

September 10, 2000

“I see, I see,” said the blind man, as he picked up the hammer and saw. That play on words has been one of my favorites for over thirty years. And it describes what happened in today’s reading from the gospel: the blind men see what no one else sees; the men who can see do not see what is going on. Where are we in this story? What did the blind men see? Is there something here for us to see also?

What the blind men saw is that Jesus Christ is Lord. They called him Lord; they called him son of David; they asked him for help. This Lordship is set forth in today’s readings in his words to his disciples. “The Son of Man [a title Jesus used for himself] came not to be served but to serve.” That is startling: The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. This stands everything on its head. The Lord is coming to do something for us. He is not asking us to do something for him. In this simple reversal we learn the radical message of the gospel. The Son of man came not to be served but to serve.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not first of all a call for us to serve, but is instead, first of all, an announcement of what God has done for us. It is important to keep this order right.

Too many liberal churches have confused this and done extensive damage to the church. (It may take years to undo it.) This places all the emphasis on what we do—feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, helping the poor, visiting the sick, welcoming the handicapped. All of these are good in and of themselves, but that is beside the point and makes us miss the point. The church is not about us and our goodness. The church is about the goodness of God first, last, and always. To forget this, to obscure this, to hide this, is to jettison the gospel of Jesus Christ and to cease being the church.

So it is a mistake for the church to think that first of all it is called to serve. Yes, we are called to serve, but that is always secondary at best. A premature focus on service risks forfeiting the church’s identity. The Kiwanis Club calls me to serve. The United Way calls me to serve. The City of Richmond calls me to serve. The human community calls me to serve. If the church starts there it is no different from the rest.

So, the church does not first of all call upon us to do something, but tells us the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us. How has he served us? With his death and resurrection, his death winning us forgiveness of sin, his resurrection bringing the promise of eternal life. “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.” This is his service! We are not talking about waiting tables or teaching parables. Jesus Christ suffered and died a horrible death on our account, and God raised him to a new different life. This is what Jesus announced to the disciples. This is what Jesus did. This is what we are to announce to the world.

Given the wonderful announcement of what God in Christ has done for us, how are we to respond? Two ways are set forth in the text. The first is that of the disciples. They got it wrong, but that is recorded here as an ongoing warning to us, because the church is always tempted to get it wrong. They must have thought, since Christ is doing all this for us, we must be really special people! Look at how good we are! Maybe we can get the best seats in heaven! Look at us! Look at us!

Look at us! But that just is not what the church is all about. We are supposed to be saying “Look at him! Look at him! Look at him!” By the way, when Jesus asked the disciples whether they could drink the cup he did, and they said they could, I doubt they knew what he was asking or what they were saying. He was talking about the cup of suffering and death. It was not something he wanted or asked for! Then, he promised them they would drink it, that they would suffer and die, for him and for his sake. You see, the service to which we are called is not social do-goodism, but suffering and dying! And is not something we are to seek out. If we proclaim and live the gospel, it will come to us.

Now, by way of contrast to the arrogance of the misguided disciples, we find two blind men sitting in the dirt beside the road screaming their heads off. What did they see? They saw that Jesus is Lord, and in the light of his grace, they saw their own neediness. Instead of saying, “Look at us!” They said, “Help us see, so we can look at you.” And that makes all the difference in the world. Christianity is not about what we do. It’s about knowing how much we need what Christ does for us.

Strangely enough, the crowds tried to shut up the blind men. The world, in its pride of power, has never liked the gospel. And too often, the church, in its pride of doing, has obscured the gospel. But these two blind men, in today’s reading, are the model of Christian faith.

Where does this leave us? First of all, we are to believe the good news which we have heard and received. Jesus is Lord! He has come not to be served but to serve. He helps us in our neediness, our blindness, our poverty, our sinfulness, our mortality, our lostness, our confusion, our suffering, and our dying. He helps us. This is the good news we have announced for centuries. Can you believe it?

Second, we are to follow. That is what the blind men did. They got up and followed Jesus. We are to live our lives individually and as a church following Jesus Christ. We are to focus our attention on him and not on ourselves. We are to point others to him and not to ourselves. That is the purpose of this beautiful sanctuary—the proclamation of the gospel. That is the purpose of the wonderful radio ministry which we are celebrating today—to proclaim the gospel. And that is the purpose of our Christian Education program—to teach the Bible and the Christian faith. That is the purpose of the entire existence of the church—to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Can we follow him?

Third, and only third—we are in fact called to serve. We cannot serve as Christ has served. His service is unique, perfect, and complete. He has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves so we cannot and need not serve as Christ has served. Moreover, we do not serve out of the goodness of our hearts because, frankly, we’re not very good.

We need to remember that. But we can and do serve, on good days, even if only in small and broken ways. We can and do serve because he served us, and in order to point to him first, last, and always, in order to point to him by our service, in order that all might see and know and believe and follow.

So, yes, in the end we are called to feed the hungry to house the homeless to clothe the naked to visit those who are sick and in prison. In the end, we are called to serve in deeds of obedience and mercy. In the end, our service can be valuable as long as we do not let it hide or obscure his service to us.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve! “I see, I see,” said the blind man as he picked up the hammer and saw.

To God be the glory forever, and ever. Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org