

Serving the Greatest

Joshua 7: 8-13

Matthew 20: 20-28

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts in the late 1950s, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished.

As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

“Excuse me,” the Governor said, “can I have another piece of chicken?”

“Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.”

“But I’m starved,” the governor said.

“Sorry, only one to a customer.”

The Governor was usually a modest man, but he decided that this time he’d throw a little weight around. “Do you know who I am? I’m the governor of this state.”

“Oh. Well. Now do you know who I am? I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along!”

Serving the greatest can be a humbling experience for those who feel *they’re* the greatest or somehow superior and deserving special treatment, a viewpoint that may not be shared by others. In such circumstances, who is the servant and who is the greatest may have to get sorted out. In the case of Gov. Herter, the one who controlled the chicken was the greatest at that moment, not the person who ran the state.

Our scriptures today confront this confusion which happens a lot when humans and God fail to get on the same page. God seems to have certain ideas about how humans are to be serving God, and humans get this notion that God is simply there to serve their needs.

We see this in the story from Joshua. Moses is gone and the people have crossed the Jordan under Joshua’s leadership. Joshua is engaged in the conquest of the Promised Land. In chapter 6, Joshua’s people were able to conquer the great fortified city of Jericho by marching around the city and blowing the *shofar* or trumpets which brought down the walls. A great victory!

However, in the opening verse to chapter 7, we hear: *But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things.* “Devoted things”? What are they? “Devoted things” would be items that have been devoted to the Canaanite gods. This is in violation

of God's expressed instructions about dealing with plunder from Jericho, *Keep away from the devoted things so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them* (6:18). Among the plunder taken, and not destroyed as they should have been, were these items deemed sacred and pledged to the Canaanite gods. Perhaps they thought the rule applied to something else, or perhaps they thought God won't know, or perhaps they thought these precious items were simply too good to destroy because, hey, this could make me a rich man. In any case, the rule did apply to these items, God did know, and keeping them won't make you a rich man, but a dead man.

Joshua doesn't seem to know, however. He sends out spies to surveil the next objective, the city of Ai. The spies come back and say not to worry. You don't need to send the whole army; just a few thousand will suffice to take the city. Needless to say, Joshua's 'few thousand' got their butts whipped and ran in hasty retreat, getting attacked the whole way home. Following this rout, it says: *At this, the hearts of the people melted and became like water.*

Our passage shows Joshua in deep despair. He believes this battlefield loss will embolden the other Canaanite leaders to unite and then smother the Israelites. Having torn his clothes and with his face in the ground, now Joshua starts sounding whiny in a familiar voice from the wandering in the wilderness: *"Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!"* (7:7)

God doesn't want to hear it, saying to Joshua: *"Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction."* (7:10-12)

The final instruction is for Joshua to tell the people to consecrate themselves, to make themselves holy and righteous, to commit themselves to God and to serving God alone by purging themselves of the idols and images and items that they had decided to keep from the plunder of Jericho. You cannot expect God to serve your interests in gaining the Promised Land if you ignore or refuse God's commands to serve God and God alone with divided loyalties. Jesus' teaching that you cannot serve both God and mammon would apply here, too.

If God is the greatest, the Holy Sovereign of God's people who will gain them the Promised Land, then God needs to be served faithfully. The consequences of divided loyalty, either by faithfulness to the gods of the people of the land, the Canaanites, or by faithfulness to selfish greed will ensure that God will have nothing to do with you. If that means you suffer the consequences, even fatal consequences, then that's on you and comes from your choices.

We can see that serving the greatest also means faithfully serving *only* the greatest, the One God who provides for you in all ways. This also demands the greatest service from you and me, that there is no other priority competing with the God who calls us to serve God's will and way.

If you think you're doing a great job at serving the greatest, or if you think your kids are doing such a great job at serving the greatest, you might be like Momma Zebedee and ask Jesus for something special. That's what happens in our text from Matthew, although Mark's version, where the brothers ask themselves, may be the original form of the story.

In Matthew, Momma Zebedee kneels. The request is the same in both Matthew and Mark: let one brother sit at your right and the other brother sit at your left, Lord, in your Kingdom. These are, of course, places of special privilege and authority. They get to whisper in the ear of the Lord and are privy to the great decisions of the Lord. They want to help out as judges on the Day of Judgment.

Jesus gives them a mild rebuke: *"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."* Notice how Momma has dropped from the picture and suddenly the brothers are there to answer the questions, exactly as in Mark's version.

The cup in question most likely refers anachronistically as the cup familiar to those in the early church, 'the cup of the new covenant sealed in my blood' which we experience in celebrating the Lord's Supper. Basically, it's a cup of blood, Jesus's own blood that is given for the forgiveness of sins and establishment of the new covenant. They show no awareness of what he's talking about; 'yes, we can drink from your cup; just watch us.'

Jesus affirms that they will drink from his cup, when the time comes, after his earthly life has concluded in his execution and resurrection. But as far as deciding the roles of those in the Kingdom, that's not for him to decide. God, his Father, has (already) prepared those choice seats for whomever God deems should be placed there.

Such things are not much of a secret in the band of followers. The other ten find and out and they're quite ticked off. They seem to be angry with James and John, and their initial upset is likely because they tried to pull this stunt. But we can imagine that it also devolves quickly into posturing over which of the *ten* feel *they* should get privileged seats in the Kingdom. Amid a possibly raucous scene of bickering back and forth over who should and shouldn't be given privileges in the Kingdom, we can imagine Jesus calling for order – HEY! – and then proceeding with a lesson to help them all get a grip. It's like a bunch of children fighting over who is going to get a *hypothetical* cookie. Surely Jesus must have been ready to blow a gasket.

Once he gets their attention, it's time for a lesson about the Kingdom which they obviously need *desperately*. Jesus starts with a negative reference point – the rulers of the Gentiles, like the Romans and Empire officials – and how they 'lord it over them,' and then with another layer of bureaucracy over them. The Gentiles have everybody ranked with a certain level of authority. The ranking by authority invariably leads to ... exactly what we saw from the disciples – bickering and infighting over who gets to do what and over whom, who ultimately gets to sit in the highest chair of authority possible. Jesus tells them, this is **not** how *we* do it in modeling the Kingdom of God.

That's because, as we've learned, everything gets reversed and turned upside down in the Kingdom of God. The greatest honors don't go to the one who can command others into obedience to their will as the world does it. The greatest honor is for those who become the servant. Whoever wants to be at the top of the food chain in the Kingdom of God will be the greatest slave or servant of all.

We can also add to that, knowing what's said in Matthew 25 at the separation of the sheep and the goats when Jesus says: *"Then the King will say to those on his right, '... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"* Of course, "the righteous" don't recall such instances. Then Jesus says: *"... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

With this insight (repeated elsewhere), we can add that to be "numero uno" in the Kingdom means not only being a servant, but being servant to those regarded as least in the world, the poorest, the most desperate, the most dismissed, ignored, and despised. How different the Kingdom is!

In the world, there is no honor for being a servant to the low-lives of society, the dregs of the community, the useless riff-raff who are smelly, disgusting, and who deserve what they've gotten. Yes, the world passes its judgment on such pathetic scum all the time. They made bad choices. They're just looking for handout. They're lazy. They're dishonest and would cheat at every opportunity. They aren't worth anything. They're disposable – if you got rid of them, no one would care, and plenty of people would thank you. They're an eyesore, a stain on our good lives.

Yet in the Kingdom, these outcasts are our sisters and brothers, part of our human family, created in the image of God like the rest of us, who deserve as much love, compassion, and care as any member of our family. These are as much part of our family as Jesus is. The Kingdom, which grows almost unnoticed by the powers of the world, accomplishes its work in quiet ways like this. The Kingdom comes when the greatest are servants, and when they're servants of the least in the world, they are discovered to be servants of the Lord himself, serving the greatest.