

## February 25: Serve (*Mark 10:32-45*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Our Scripture today comes from the Narrative Lectionary—a year-long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the early church in the first-century world; for the past two months, we’ve been following the story of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. Our readings help us trace a particular theme throughout the Bible’s big story, and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each week’s passage, there’s a compelling action verb embedded in the narrative, an action verb we’re invited to ponder and practice. Of course, we know that *love* is the most important verb of all, that every action we do is rooted in God’s boundless, active love for all creation, poured out on our spiritual ancestors and still overflowing to us today.

And so the goal of our Scripture study isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God or understand the Bible better—the goal is to increase in love towards God and each other, love that’s lived out so that our world can receive and reflect it. Please pray with me before we dive into our text.

*Suffering Servant, thank you for revealing yourself to us in compassionate service and laying down your life in order to give us freedom. We want to follow you on the way and become like you. Please release us from everything that holds us back so that we can serve you and your world in freedom and newness of life. Amen.*

---

I’m not in the habit of regularly watching football, but I did join my family for a Superbowl party two weeks ago – and part of the fun was watching the new commercials together and critiquing them. Does anybody else enjoy the Superbowl day ads more than the football?

In the middle of the first quarter, there was an ad that was different from others, and I’ve been thinking about it ever since. Instead of marketing a product, it consisted of twelve photos of footwashing, in a wide variety of different settings. Each picture centered two people who might normally find them themselves on opposite sides of a cultural or ideological or racial divide, both with bare feet. And in almost every picture, the person with more power or privilege in that situation was kneeling down and washing the feet of the person with less – a uniformed policeman washed the feet of a young Black man; a suburban-looking woman washed the feet of a migrant woman holding a baby; an anti-abortion protestor washed the feet of a woman visiting a family planning clinic. At the end of the commercial were the words: “Jesus didn’t teach hate. He washed feet. He gets us. All of us.”

The advertisement was striking, and I spent some time afterwards lurking on social media to see what people were saying about it. I expected to find discussion and criticism about whether it was good to spend millions of dollars on a Superbowl ad rather than serving the poor, or questions about the group funding the ad and where their money came from, or worries that the advertisement didn't share the whole gospel of Jesus – and I did find all of these issues raised online. But what surprised me was the incredible level of outrage the ad stirred up in Christians who were offended by the implication that Jesus would wash the feet of the “sinful” people portrayed in the pictures, or call his followers to do the same. People felt that such service was equivalent to tolerance of evil and revealed Jesus not as Lord or divine, but as a “hippie social worker”. Many people posted their own, more “accurate” pictures of how Jesus “gets us”, such as Jesus brandishing a whip in the temple, families drowning in the great flood from Genesis, and people burning in Hell. Here are some representative quotes:

- *The 'He Gets Us' commercial might seem harmless to some, but it's obviously part of a psyop to trick Christians into thinking Jesus is fine with sin & apostasy. It's the opposite of what our world needs right now.*
- *The “He Gets Us” ad hits every woke point. It is nauseating. They’re making up who Jesus was, and is. Don’t be fooled by their deception.*
- *Christ was a servant to those willing to be served by Him, not those who opposed Him.*
- *This is the most offensive commercial against Christians that I’ve ever seen.*
- *It displays a woke Jesus that just doesn’t exist.*
- *Turns out the “he” in “He Gets Us” is Satan.*
- *An affront to God.*
- *Blasphemy.*
- *This is not the Jesus I know.*

As I read all of these comments, the passage that we just heard from Mark 10 was playing through my mind. And I realized that what Jesus was teaching is just as counter-cultural and difficult to accept today, even for Jesus’ own self-proclaimed followers, as it was 2000 years ago. Just as James and John failed to “get” Jesus then, we still struggle, and we need to hear and receive Jesus’ teaching afresh. Before I dig into the passage more deeply, though, I’d like to put it in the context of the big story Mark tells.

Mark’s gospel could be divided into two main parts or acts, with a bridge that connects them. The first act, chapters 1-8, covers three years of Jesus’ public ministry in which he performed amazing miracles, displayed divine power over the forces of nature and of evil, and taught with great authority.

The second act of Mark, chapters 11-18, covers just one eventful week, from Jesus' entry to Jerusalem to his crucifixion and resurrection. In these chapters, Jesus performed zero public miracles – instead, he deliberately followed a path that led to his execution, refusing to use any of his power to save himself.

And connecting these two acts is a bridge section in which Jesus took his disciples aside, three times, to explain what it truly meant to be the promised Messiah who brings salvation and freedom to the world – it meant following a humble path of sacrificial servanthood that led to suffering and death in Jerusalem – and each of the three times Jesus predicted his upcoming death, the disciples misunderstand and responded inappropriately, prompting Jesus to teach them more about what it truly means to follow him.

Today's passage comes from the end of this bridge section, and it contains Jesus' third and most detailed prediction of his coming suffering and death. Jesus was leading the way to Jerusalem, and he explained that when they got there, he would be delivered to the authorities, condemned to death, mocked, spit on, flogged, and killed, and rise again after three days. And then, inexplicably, two of Jesus' disciples came to him and asked if they could reserve seats on the right and left hand side of Jesus' throne in his glory.

Now, I've spent some time wondering how James and John could possibly hear Jesus talk about being mocked, flogged, spit on, and killed, and conclude that he was about to come into glory. It's really easy to dismiss them as blundering fools or deluded opportunists, but I don't think that's accurate. James and John, along with Peter, made up the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, the ones closest to him. These were the three men who earlier went up the mountain with Jesus and saw him so transfigured and dazzling bright that they couldn't think straight. And now they were headed up again, up to Jerusalem, the focal point of so many Messianic prophecies. Perhaps James and John thought Jesus was using figurative, parable-like language in his predictions– that there would be a struggle, but it would end in a glorious victory. They were even ready to fight alongside Jesus – when he asked if they were willing to share his cup and his baptism, they immediately said yes. James and John might have been confused and blinded, but they didn't lack commitment, loyalty, courage, or a belief in Jesus' greatness.

And even their request for seats of prime status at Jesus' right and left might have been rooted in a misguided faith in Jesus' promised upside-down kingdom. Perhaps James and John truly believed that Jesus came to cast the powerful down from their thrones and lift up the meek and the lowly – and what greater reversal than the elevation of these two lowly fisherman,

dispossessed members of an occupied nation, living at subsistence level and vulnerable to exploitation, to places at the right and left of the Messiah, ruling with him in his new kingdom?

I think it's important to humanize James and John here, to see their blindness and ambition sympathetically, because I believe we are no different. We still struggle to "get" Jesus, to really understand what he came to do and what he calls us to as his followers. And that's why I'm so glad this story doesn't end with Jesus's refusal to grant James & John's request, but with him gathering all the disciples together and once again reorienting them to his radical new way.

First, Jesus reminded them of how lousy it was to live under the thumb of the Roman empire – to be a dispossessed people controlled by power-hungry leaders who lorded it over them. And then Jesus subtly warned them that their thirst for power and status would turn them into the tyrants they hated. Jesus didn't come to replace the Roman empire with an alternate empire that operated with the same hierarchy. He didn't come to lift up the lowly so they could become the power-hungry rulers they replaced, lording it over the people now underneath them. Jesus came to break the cycles of sin, oppression, & exploitation that hold us in bondage. He lifted up and ennobled the men and women who followed him so that they could live in freedom and freely choose to become like him – the slave of all: "for even the Son of Man," he said, using a royal title from the prophet Daniel for himself, "did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There are many versions of the Bible that don't use the word "slave" in this passage, even though "slave of all" is an accurate translation of the Greek. To suggest that Jesus' followers should submit to the kind of horrific bondage our nation fought a war to end risks minimizing the lasting harm and depersonalizing effects of that evil institution. So it's important to emphasize that Jesus is not glorifying slavery here. He's not asking people to remain in situations of oppression – he said he came to set the captives free. Jesus is calling followers he has already freed and empowered to exercise their privilege by willingly subverting it in order to lift up and serve their neighbors – because that's what it means to be like Jesus.

Jesus, who is God himself and deserving of all honor, power, and glory, relinquished his privilege to become the "slave of all" and give his life as a ransom for many. The word translated "ransom" in verse 45 was mainly used in secular Greek to describe a payment that secured the release of a slave or a person captured in war. To ransom someone was to liberate or deliver them by paying a price – and for Jesus, that payment was his own life, poured out in

compassionate service and then laid down to secure our freedom. This is how our God chose to be glorified – as a suffering servant with us, mocked and tortured and pierced for our transgressions; lifted up not on a throne but on a cross, with the “seats” on his right and left occupied by crucified thieves. He was crushed for our iniquities, and by his wounds we are healed. Jesus’ loving self-sacrifice makes our own freedom possible – freedom from sin and brokenness and condemnation, freedom from alienation from God and others, freedom from the cycles of oppression and bondage and hate and revenge that ravage our world, freedom from systems of dominance and empire.

And so even though our action verb for today is “to serve” – it’s what Jesus is clearly calling his followers to in this passage – I want to first emphasize the freedom that such service is rooted in, the freedom that Jesus came to bring us, and to ask the question – what do you need freedom from? What is weighing you down and preventing you from living fully? I love the story right after this passage, where the blind man Bartimaeus shouted out for Jesus and refused to be silenced. Jesus called him over and asked him the very same question he posed to James and John: “What do you want me to do for you?” – and instead of grasping for power or status, Bartimaeus asked for freedom from the blindness that kept him trapped as a beggar: “I want to see!” And Jesus healed him. If Jesus asked you that same question today – “what do you want me to do for you?” how would you answer it? It’s not an easy question – honestly answering takes both courage and vulnerability; it means admitting our neediness. But I believe that Jesus wants to heal and free us, and I challenge you to ponder his question and then, like Bartimaeus, shamelessly bring your neediness to Jesus and trust him to hear you and respond.

As soon as he was healed, Bartimaeus lived into his newfound freedom by choosing to follow Jesus on the way. Jesus frees and empowers his followers so that we can become like him and walk his way, laying down privilege and rights and status and becoming the slave of all so that others may also find freedom. It is in walking Jesus’ path of loving, humble service that we participate in overturning rather than maintaining systems of oppression and domination and injustice in our world.

Think about what it means to take on the posture of “the slave of *all*” when we serve others. It means that we don’t judge whether or not a person is “deserving” of service before we provide it, we don’t discriminate when it comes to choosing who to serve, we don’t put conditions on our service, and we don’t expect or demand any payback from the one being served – not even gratitude. Instead, we offer the kind of service that lifts up the person served,

affirming their personhood and innate worth, regardless of their beliefs or actions – because this is what it looks like to follow the model of Jesus.

I challenge you to picture three different people right now – first, a person you are close to – somebody you live with, or a close friend or family member or someone in this church community. Second, picture someone who is in need or suffering – it could be somebody you know personally, or somebody you have noticed in your community – maybe even somebody on the other side of the world. And third, think of somebody that you strongly disagree with because of their political or social views or life choices. How can you serve each one of those people in the near future, in a way that decenters yourself while lifting them up and affirming who they are? The final page of our Lenten devotional has 40 ideas for love in action, and I encourage you to look at that list if you need practical ideas.

I want to conclude by circling back to the “He gets us” footwashing ad. In the culture of Jesus’ time, footwashing was the job of a servant or slave – it underscored the humble status of the footwasher and elevated the status of the person whose feet were washed. In many of the negative reactions to that ad, there was a concern that Jesus’ divine status or holiness would be threatened if he washed the feet of the kind of people in the pictures, who had done nothing to merit his service and affirmation. But the Jesus we see in Scripture gets on his knees as the slave of all to wash the feet of those he loved, including the man who had already agreed to betray him, precisely *because* he knew who he was – he knew he had come from God and was returning to God and that God had put all things under his power – and he wanted to show us what God truly looks like. Jesus’ humble servanthood doesn’t threaten his divinity or holiness – instead, it reveals God’s core nature and God’s tenacious, radical, unconditional love for us. And I believe that when we, as his followers, willingly relinquish privilege or power or the chance to “win” and be superior to those we disagree with, when we choose to serve our enemies rather than hate or despise or judge them, we proclaim the true identity of the Savior we follow in a radical way. And not only that – I believe that in the midst of our service, we encounter Jesus – we get him – in a new and powerful way. Amen.