

Thank you Bill for reminding us that St. Thomas is a place where we find important connections with one another, fellowship that enriches our lives. I recall that the first sermon I preached here was about finding a home, a place where we can be most truly ourselves. Barbara and I have a couch in our living room that faces a picture window looking east. I often say Morning Prayer there; it is a place where I feel at home. And it was the collect for peace that came to mind as I was preparing the sermon for today: *O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom...*

Think about it: *to serve is perfect freedom*. How can service be perfect freedom? It is a phrase that can startle us; it seems to be an oxymoron. Who will you serve?

After all, we prize freedom, and accomplishment. Yet you will always serve something or someone whether you know it or not. This is at the heart of much of Mark's Gospel. In Chapter 8, Jesus cures a blind man at Bethsaida, but it doesn't seem to take at first; it takes a little time for the man to regain his sight. Then Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus announces his impending death. Peter doesn't get it and rebukes Jesus (who in turn rebukes Peter.)

In the next chapter, Jesus repeats that he will die in Jerusalem, a pronouncement that terrifies his disciples into silence...until, they begin arguing with each other about who is the greatest because they don't get it. Jesus' words take time to sink in, so he puts a child in his lap and says that leadership and greatness are about welcoming the vulnerable.

In Chapter 10, Jesus again says that he is going to Jerusalem to die. Again, the disciples don't get it. James and John ask for places of honor and then the rest of the disciples resent their self-interested pushiness. Jesus' words still haven't sunk in, so he says as clearly as possible that to be great is to serve others and that to be first is to be last. And then comes another healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus.

It's interesting, how these healings of blindness bracket Jesus' three announcements of his impending death, the disciples' failure to understand, and Jesus teaching about what constitutes greatness. I think Mark tells the story this way because he knows that Jesus' whole life runs contrary to our natural tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life and he knows we need time to let it sink in. James and John think greatness comes from status and power. And in response, Jesus points out that there is no escaping service. You will either willingly, even joyfully, serve others, or you will become a slave to your illusions that you can be free and secure your future through status and power or wealth or youth or fame or possessions.

So I'll ask: who will you serve?...the voices of the culture that say that you can be free on your own and at any cost, or the voice of Jesus that calls you to find your

freedom and your true self, through service to neighbor. My bet is that those people working that lasagna dinner last night received more than they gave when all was said and done. Greeting, waiting tables, cooking in the kitchen, washing the dishes were all for the purpose of service, of raising funds to tend to some of the most vulnerable around us.

We are made to be in relationship and we discover our wholeness only as we join ourselves to the fortunes of those around us. God delights in our relationships at home and school and work and in the community and we discover our identity as whole people as we see ourselves inextricably linked with those around us.

I love the theme of our stewardship campaign “walk in love.” As we walk in love, in the way of Jesus, we find ourselves doing so not alone, but together. Walking in one direction instead of each on their own path and this path can be one of joy, giving ourselves to magnifying God’s compassion and goodness in the world through service.

Perhaps that’s how we might hear Jesus’ description of his life as giving himself “as a ransom for many” – not as Jesus buying us back from God, but as paying himself out in order to rescue us from our delusion that we are self-sufficient, independent, self-made. Jesus’ whole life (and his death) challenges not only our assumptions but the powers that be with the surprising and life-giving revelation that as we lose ourselves in service, we find ourselves living more fully than ever before. It’s a sacrifice validated in the Resurrection and in our own experience as we give ourselves away in service and love only to discover a depth and quality of life we never experienced before.

Who will you serve? You don’t have to let others answer this for you. This is part of our glorious freedom as God’s children. And once you’ve answered this question, you can be set free by God’s promise and power to serve others and find yourself...and yes, find home.

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