

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

September 19, 2021 – PENTECOST 17 / Proper 20B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*A Servant’s Heart*”

Jeremiah 11:18-20 (The Lord is a God of justice)  
Psalm 54 (A prayer for rescue and salvation)  
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a (Godly wisdom is peaceable, gentle, yielding, fruitful, and impartial.)  
St. Mark 9:30-37 (Jesus teaches that we must be servants of one another.)

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“Character is much better kept than recovered” so said the American revolutionary, Thomas Paine.<sup>1</sup> And “Reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone; character is what the angels say about you before the throne of God,” wrote William Hersey Davis, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century New Testament professor.<sup>2</sup> In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus’ disciples are preoccupied with their reputations, while Jesus is trying to teach them an important lesson on character.

As Jesus is passing through Galilee, He wants to be alone with His disciples so He can teach them without being disturbed. When He finds a quiet, out-of-the-way place, for the second time, Jesus tells them: “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

The disciples don’t understand what Jesus is saying, and Saint Mark tells us they were too afraid to ask. Although they were afraid to ask Jesus any questions, they had no qualms when it came to arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest. As they walked along the road to Capernaum, perhaps the men thought they were out of earshot of Jesus, or somehow believed the Sovereign Lord would not know what they were talking about. Still harboring the notion that Jesus came to establish an *earthly* kingdom, they freely debated who would be the chosen leaders when He reigned. Whom would He appoint governor? Who would command Christ’s army? Who would be His ambassador? “Surely, it will be me,” one boasted. “You must be kidding!” bragged another. “I’ll be the one!” And on it went.

Jesus had just told His friends that He was to be betrayed, killed, and then they would witness the greatest miracle of all, His rising from the dead—yet they were disputing over who would be the greatest in an imaginary earthly kingdom.

Jesus was hoping to teach them about the self-emptying service He would offer the world, and how that would provide a template for their life as Christians: a life of compassion for others, and humble service. But His companions were still dreaming of earthly power and glory. Of course, that is the way of the world. It rejects the possibility that glory might only come about *through* suffering and death.

So, Jesus decides to take another approach to help them understand His example of servanthood—and by extension, His teaching that all who follow Christ must have a servant’s heart. He takes into His arms a little child, one who is powerless and dependent upon someone greater for guidance. In ancient Hebrew culture, children were considered of no importance, and pointing to one such child seems to be the only way Jesus can convey to His disciples the image of humility that recognizes its dependence on God.

Now there are two Greek words we translate as “servant.” One is “*doulos*,” usually rendered as “slave” or “bond-servant.” “*Doulos*” represents a type of domestic slavery, but the connotation is not of cruel oppression, but rather of one who labors under *obligation* to another. However, in today’s Gospel, Jesus uses a different Greek word—“*diakonos*”—from which we get the word “deacon.” At one time, this word meant “one who waits tables,” or, in our jargon, “a server.” Throughout the history of the Church, “*diakonos*” has referred to one kind of Christ-like service or another; from one who waits tables, to one who cares for the poor and needy; visits the sick and those in prison; looks out for widows and orphans; and assists the clergy. Either way, “*diakonos*” refers to one who has the heart of a servant, one who is willing to be a servant of all. And that’s the kind of person Jesus is looking for.<sup>3</sup>

In 1878, when William Booth's Salvation Army was beginning to make its mark, people from all over the world began enlisting. One man, who had once dreamed of becoming a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to enlist. Samuel Brengle left a fine pastorate to join Booth's Army. But General Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle: "You've been your own boss for too long." In order to instill humility in Brengle, he set him to work cleaning the boots of other trainees.

Brengle became discouraged and resentful. Had he traveled that far just to blacken shoes? And then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, uneducated fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "You washed their feet; I will shine their shoes."<sup>4</sup>

As followers of Christ, we have no business dreaming of self-aggrandizement, high position, or headship, when Jesus upholds *servanthood* as our highest calling. Imagine how difficult this is for our *self-serving* society to understand, our culture that urges us to get ahead no matter what, and clamber to the top without regard for anyone else. To be like a powerless, dependent child is nothing to be ashamed of, says Christ. Rather, to be like this enables God's people to perform the highest, most honorable acts in the sight of God.

The late John Stott, an Evangelical, Anglican theologian, writes that a servant-attitude is characterized by the following principles:

- If people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered, *love them anyway*.
- If you do good, and people accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives, or the good you do is forgotten tomorrow, *do good anyway*.
- If, honesty and openness make you vulnerable, *be honest and open anyway*.
- If the biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds, *think big anyway*.
- If people follow only top dogs, *fight for the underdogs anyway*.
- If what you spend years building may be destroyed overnight, *build anyway*.
- If people really need your help, but attack you if you do help, *help them anyway*.
- If you give the world the best you have, and get kicked in the teeth, *give your best anyway*.<sup>5</sup>

In short, a servant attitude means, "It's not about me." Jesus demonstrated this when He served all of us self-righteous sinners on the cross at Calvary.

In Philippians 2:5-7, Saint Paul writes, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ, who being in very nature *God*, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a *servant*."

So, is it any wonder that if we try to be like Jesus—taking upon ourselves the burdens of worthless no-account servants, trying to serve others even though we may be ridiculed for it—that we may be judged as harshly as Christ was? If so, it's because others see Christ in us! And thanks be to God if they do see Christ in us!

Whenever you willingly and lovingly give way for the sake of another, or your sole desire to perform a service for someone else has nothing to do with self-interest, but is only for Christ's sake, then you can be assured the Holy Spirit is active in your life. Even if you cannot find within yourself a self-sacrificing spirit, God's Holy Spirit is still active in you. Pray that He will lead you toward repentance and a deeper faith that will help to *form in you* a servant's attitude and actions.

That kind of character is well illustrated by a quote from Robert Green Ingersoll, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century orator: "He stands erect by bending over the fallen. He rises by lifting others."<sup>6</sup>

There is no greater calling on earth than to show others our loving God through our words and actions. May God keep us faithful, and give us servant's hearts—and hands—that Christ may be seen and believed in, through all that we say and do. Lord, we pray that You would grant us this, in Your Son's Most Holy Name, *Amen*.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Paine, "Character," [SermonIllustrations.com](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/character.htm) <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/character.htm> 9 September 2021.

<sup>5</sup> William Hersey Davis Quotes, [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/503753.William_Hersey_Davis) <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/503753.William\_Hersey\_Davis> 9 September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Inspired by Andrew J. Wollman, "The Heart of a Servant," [Traces of Peace LCMIS](http://www.pogoshien.net/SermonTable.htm) <http://www.pogoshien.net/SermonTable.htm> 19 September 2009.

<sup>7</sup> K. Hughes, *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome* (Tyndale, 1988), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Adapt. John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait, Some New Testament World Studies*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 100ff.

<sup>9</sup> Robert G. Ingersoll, "Humility," [Pass It On.com](https://www.passion.com/inspirational-quotes/3613-he-stands-erect-by-bending-over-the-fallen-he) <https://www.passion.com/inspirational-quotes/3613-he-stands-erect-by-bending-over-the-fallen-he> 9 September 2021.