

# Servant of All

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*Text: Mark 9:30-37*

Have you ever had someone treat you differently once they found out who you were? I was 24 years old, a seminary intern working at a church for the first time. The youth group at the church was preparing food to bring to a local soup kitchen, and I was in the church kitchen with them and some other adult volunteers. If my memory serves, we were making a baked apple dish, and so I was peeling apples. Then one of the older women—someone who regularly helped with the soup kitchen, but not the youth group—took an interest in my work. “Try to get larger shavings of the peel,” she said, pointing at the apple I was working on. A bit later, she looked over at me again and grimaced. “No, not there. Move the peel off to the side.” And she continued like this, making critical comments. Finally, it came time for us to leave for the soup kitchen, and one of the youth group’s adult leaders said, “David, would you lead us in prayer?” I did, and as we were leaving, the older woman approached me, looking appalled. “I had no idea you were our seminarian,” she said. “I thought you were one of the youth.” Something had clicked for her, and she felt she had crossed a line. In her mind, more respect and deference was owed to an adult, even a young adult, than to a child.

Now, I want to be as fair as possible to the woman in this story. I don’t think she was mean-spirited. Church youth do look to adults in the church for guidance, and that it’s appropriate to be more directive with them than you would be with adults. But clearly there was a hierarchy of respect in this woman’s mind, and she was embarrassed precisely because she believed she had treated me in a way that was beneath my station. It’s like a ladder with different rungs for different people. There are some people who, because of their maturity or celebrity or power are more deserving of respect and honor, and they’re up on the top of the ladder, above the other people, who are human and who need to be treated decently, but who are less worthy of honor and attention. And even these people are above the criminals and outcasts, the folks who unsettle and upset us, whom we might not be willing to harm ourselves, but whose abuse and mistreatment at the hands of others we might be willing to overlook. These are the rungs on a ladder where attention, respect, and concern flow from the bottom to the top. That’s how we usually think about honor and respect.

But in our gospel story, Jesus does something totally unexpected. He subverts our expectations. Is there anyone who would place themselves above God’s only Son on the ladder of honor? Is there anyone more deserving of respect? And yet Jesus tells his disciples that precisely because he is God’s chosen Messiah, his path leads to betrayal and death at the bottom of the ladder. It’s not only that he’s going to be killed, not only that he’s going to lay down his life. A soldier might lay down her life for her country or her comrades, and be honored for it. A firefighter might make the ultimate sacrifice to save someone else, and be seen as a hero. Just dying for others doesn’t necessarily put you at the bottom of the ladder. It might put you at the top. But Jesus says that because he’s the Messiah, he is going to lay down his life as a criminal, rejected and despised.

If the woman in the kitchen was mortified at mistaking a seminarian for a youth, think of how upsetting it must have been for the disciples to hear Jesus calmly explaining that it was necessary, fitting, appropriate for him, the Messiah, the Son of God to suffer and die like a common criminal. The disciples are confused, afraid, and silent.

And if Jesus left it there, it would have been a problem for the disciples, but maybe not us. We understand, in a way that they couldn't, that Jesus' path leads through death to the empty tomb. So maybe, just maybe, this is something unique about Jesus. Maybe he's the only one who needs to put himself last and least of all. Maybe he's the only one who gets to relate to everyone else not as an indulgent master, but as a subservient slave. If that's true, then maybe we can just be spectators to his sacrifice, sitting back and admiring what he did. But Jesus didn't leave it there, did he? Jesus wanted the community gathered in his name to follow his example, to put themselves last of all.

He starts with his own inner circle. Jesus overhears the disciples arguing about who gets to be second-in-command in the movement, who ought to report to whom. They want to figure out the org chart so that those who deserve the most respect can get it. But that's not the way of Jesus, and so Jesus makes his demand concrete. Jesus reaches out and draws a child into the circle. In the world of Jesus and his disciples, children were at the bottom rung of the social ladder. Children seldom find their way into the stories of the Gospel, and when they do it is almost always because their parents have come to ask Jesus to cure them of their illnesses. In this world, children become important in the stories told by adults only when there is a crisis. Children had no right to determine what happened to them, and the word of the head of household was law, was literally life and death for them. There was no children's services agency to protect them. They were utterly powerless, utterly dependent on others. They lived in the quiet, hidden places at the edge of the adult world. Ask yourself, where did Jesus find this child that he brought into the center of the circle? The child didn't materialize out of thin air—she was there the whole time, in the background where she was supposed to be, sometimes seen, never heard. It's no coincidence that the Greek word  $\pi\alpha\iota\varsigma$ , which literally means "child," also means "slave."

A child is the lowest of the low, in Jesus' world. And so Jesus astonishes his disciples by taking this child, bringing her into the center of the circle, and saying, "Welcome her, receive her." These are words that have to do with hospitality. To welcome someone is not just to shake their hand and say hello. It's not about having an approving mental attitude about a category of persons that exists *out there* somewhere. Jesus isn't telling his disciples to think fondly of children in general, or even to hug them while tousling their hair. He is saying something completely different, and much more serious. Jesus is telling them to *welcome* this child.

And in the world of the disciples "welcoming" someone is an action you can see. It is the sacred duty of a host. It means putting yourself at the service of an honored guest. It means seating them at the head of the table, giving them pride of place. It means feeding them, meeting their needs before those of your own household. It means washing their feet, not shrinking back from their dust and sweat. And Jesus wants the disciples to treat this child he has placed before them, this nobody, this invisible non-person, with honor and reverence. This is radical stuff. This is the world turned upside down. This is the way of Jesus.

But I don't think we can fully appreciate just how radical it is until we try and translate it into our time. Who are the people you locate on the bottom of the ladder? What would it take to shock you, in the way that Jesus shocked his disciples?

Jesus brought his disciples to the county jail, and in the visiting room he introduced them to a prisoner, saying, "Whoever welcomes one such prisoner in my name welcomes me." Would you give a banquet for this prisoner, or wash his feet?

Jesus took his disciples to an abandoned house and showed them a drug addict. The addict kept asking them for money so she could get a fix, although she promised that she was going clean tomorrow. Jesus turned to them and said, "Whoever welcomes one such addict in my name welcomes me." Would you invite this woman into your home, and give her the place of honor at your dinner table?

Jesus drove his disciples to the border, and he showed them a family of refugees, fleeing violence in their home country. They had been turned back at the border, day after day, and the authorities said, "We have no room for you right now. Come back later." Jesus took the family and put them at the center of the disciples' circle and said, "Whoever welcomes one such refugee family in my name welcomes me."

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and a servant of all...." Wipe away all your pretensions, Jesus says. If you want to measure up in the Kingdom of God, put yourself at the service of the person the world thinks most insignificant or contemptible. Receive them as you would an honored guest. That's what greatness looks like. Jesus took the lowest kind of person he could find, a person that everyone thought was worthless, and said to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such person in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

On Friday and Saturday I was up in Albany for Synod Assembly, a gathering of Presbyterians from all over the Northeast. I missed this summer's General Assembly in St. Louis, but I heard people speak movingly about something that happened there. Those gathered for General Assembly learned about the impact of cash bail. They learned that those arrested for minor offenses end up in jail, simply because they're poor and can't afford to pay to be released. And because they can't get to work, they lose their job. And when their case comes to trial and they're released, because it was a minor offense after all, they can't get another job, because now they have a record. And this doesn't happen to people with means, even if they commit the same offenses. In effect, it's an extra punishment, for being poor. As Diane Givens Moffett, the new director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, told us, it's like "we kick the poor, and then blame them for limping." So instead of crafting another statement or preparing another study, those gathered for General Assembly took to the streets, and they marched up to the county courthouse, and they paid the bail money to release the prisoners being held there, because one of the very first things Jesus said about his ministry was that he had come to proclaim "release to the captives" (Luke 4:18). And this became a powerful act of evangelism too, because it made the local news, and all of a sudden everyone was saying, "Presbyterians? Aren't they the ones who bailed out the county jail?"

What kind of witness is possible, how might people sit up and take notice, if we follow Jesus to the bottom of the ladder, if we begin to see ourselves, like him, as the servant of all?

Jesus is asking us to do only what he has already done for us. As God's Son he had no duty to serve us or care for us. If anything, it ought to have been the other way around. As the only fully integrated human being, perfectly in touch with God, he had no duty to put himself below sinners—thieves and prostitutes and sinners like us. But Jesus washed his disciples' feet. He gave his life for us, not in a noble or heroic way, but in a brutal execution, as humiliating and degrading as it was agonizing. And even from the cross he offered a thief the hope of paradise. Jesus made himself lower than the lowest of the low, so that he could serve and welcome us all—no one was left beneath

him.

And when we embrace that gift, when we take hold of the new life with God Jesus gives us, we enter God's Kingdom, where the first are last and the last first, where the greatest person is the one who serves all, where no one is beneath our notice or care, because the Christ we love is underneath them all. We can only embrace him, we can only find him, if we join him there at the bottom of the ladder, reaching up with outstretched hands to welcome the children, welcome the illegals, welcome the junkies, welcome the criminals, welcome each and every one of the lost and despised and rejected of the world we inhabit. Come, Jesus says, and join me at the bottom. Come lower, and serve. Come lower, and let all my love, every one of my embraces enfold you. Amen.