

“Being a Servant”
Mark 9:33-37
Sixth Sunday of Easter—Youth Sunday
April 27, 2008

“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.” III John 9-10

No one knows whom Diotrephes happened to be or exactly what he did to cause his name to go down in history as a synonym for selfishness and egotism. His story is limited to only the 9th and 10th verses of the 3rd letter of John. The context of those verses gives the impression that he may have had some kind of beef with the writer of III John. That seems rather obvious in the way the letter writer sarcastically described him. You have already heard how the New Revised Standard Version rendered those words: “Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first...” Other translations put it like this: “Diotrephes, who loves to be first...”¹ or “Diotrephes, who seems to enjoy being in charge...”² or “Diotrephes, who wants to be the head of everything...”³ Not a very flattering picture, is it? Whoever Diotrephes happened to be, it is obvious that the writer of III John thought that he had missed the mark. There was no place in the church, he believed, for those who love to be first. Ask any of the original 12 disciples what they thought, and I believed that they would have told you the same. For according to this morning’s lesson from Mark, Jesus would have it no other way.

We only heard the last part of this morning’s lesson. Let me fill you in on how Mark said it began. While on their way home from a long journey around Galilee, a journey in which they had seen, among other amazing things, their teacher feed 5000 hungry souls, cure a blind man, and speak to both Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus told the twelve that, “*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*” In other words, Jesus revealed to the twelve the plan God had in mind for the salvation of the world. Yet according to Mark, the disciples were too busy arguing among themselves

¹ III John 9, The New International Version

² III John 9, The Jerusalem Bible

³ III John 9, Letters to young Churches, J.B. Phillips, MacMillian, New York, 1956

to hear or to understand what they had just been told. So when they finally arrived in Capernaum, Jesus took them behind closed doors and asked about the nature of their argument. Their utter silence was quite revealing. Jesus already knew, you see, that they had been arguing over which one of them was the greatest, over which one of the members of their little band of disciples held the higher rank. So in the privacy of that house Mark tells us that the one who would soon be nailed to the cross sat down—which was the formal way that teachers in antiquity taught—and said to them, **“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant to all.”** I have to imagine those words were a bit troubling to the twelve, just as they were to Diotrephes, and—more than likely—just as they are to us. They are words that indicate that rank is an issue in the eyes of God, but that God’s understanding of rank is very different from the understanding of the disciples and of you and me. To God it is not being first, but being last that matters. Being the one who is served is not a mark of greatness in God’s eyes. Being the one who serves is. But which one of us wants to do that? Which one of us wants to stand at the end of the line? After all, the whole goal in life is to be first—just ask Jake Long, the number one pick in this weekend’s NFL Draft.

Today is Youth Sunday. At the 10:45 service several members of our Elkhorn Hills youth group will assist me in leading worship, and Austin Hasse and Joe Beeson are going to help me preach. I wanted to get their particular perspective on Jesus’ call to be a servant. And what I have found as I talked to them and the others is that, besides being great kids, it is as hard for them as it is for the rest of us to do what Jesus calls us to do. Peer pressure, self-interests, the competitive nature of the system, and everything else you might expect is just as present in the classroom and the athletic field as it is in the workplace and the fitness center. Whether we are young or old, whether we are students or employees, whether we are just starting to learn or are in a position to teach, every one of us live in a society in which no one is going to willingly be last in line. Each of us live in a culture in which no one is going to willingly take a back seat. We all live in a country in which no one is going to willingly get down on his or her knees and wash the feet of their contemporaries. Being a servant is difficult—especially for those of us who live in Omaha, Nebraska. And if you don’t believe me, then pay close attention to how you act

next time you're stuck at 90th and Dodge during rush hour and someone starts signaling to get into your lane. Or the next time you go to a little league or youth league baseball or soccer game to see your child or grandchild participate, pay attention to your actions and the actions of those other adults sitting in the stands around you. Or even better yet, go to any gathering of United Methodist preachers and watch them compare notes on their churches, or listen to them as they tell each other how many people attended the previous Sunday's worship services. Oh yeah, we're all really good at being servants, aren't we?

Chuck Swindoll is a pastor in Texas and a prolific author who once wrote about an editorial cartoon he saw in a local newspaper. The words, "I," "Me," "Mine," and "Myself" were stacked on top of each other, forming what appeared to be a great stone pyramid. "I" was on the top; "Myself" was down at the bottom. At the base of this pyramid were thousands of people with their arms held up high, as if worshipping at a religious shrine. And then, in block letters underneath the people, was this caption: "Speaking of American Cults..."⁴

The cult of self is big in our land. It is big in our world. We come by it honestly, you know. It has been passed down from generation to generation, starting with our earliest ancestors, the original fun couple: Adam and Eve. You remember them. The Bible tells us that once upon a time everything was going along just fine until the day they decided to have a bite of that forbidden snack. Once they did, everything changed. While they had been living in harmony with God and each other, now the two of them began looking out only for themselves. You may remember how the story tells us that God came looking for them one afternoon and found them hiding in the bushes. When God asked why they were hiding, Adam whimpered, "Because we have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually laid bare." When God asked them how they knew that they had been laid bare, their selfishness and sin was revealed into the world. "Why, because that woman you gave me told me to eat that fruit!" Adam whined. "It was the snake," Eve complained, "He made me do it!" Swindoll wrote, "The pattern hasn't changed, has it? Since the original scene down through the centuries, the history of humanity is

⁴ Charles Swindoll, Improving Your Serve, Word Books, Waco, 1981, p. 28

smearred with the ugly marks of selfishness. Unwilling to be authentic, we hide, we lie, we run, we escape. Anything but the whole truth.”⁵ Selfishness is in our blood, you see. We haven’t known anything but selfishness for the longest time. Ever since that day in the garden, you and I have been the kind of people that are just not going to take a backseat to anyone. Just like Diotrephes, we like to put ourselves first. No matter what it takes, we’re going to look out for number one.

Some of you who are no longer eligible to be members of the youth group may remember that famous quote from Leonard Bernstein. Most of you who are still eligible probably need to listen. During an interview on what it takes to make a great orchestra, he was asked what was the most difficult instrument to play. His response was classic: “Second fiddle. I can get plenty of *first* violinists, but to find someone who plays *second* violin with as much enthusiasm or *second* French horn or *second* flute, now that’s a problem. And yet, if no one plays second fiddle, we have no harmony.”⁶

I wonder if any of you know how to play second fiddle? I wonder if any of you know why doing so is so important? I have a sneaking suspicion that you do know why. If I am reading this passage from Mark correctly, then—like the disciples before us—you and I both know that looking out for number one is not what followers of Jesus are supposed to be doing. Even though selfishness in our blood, we are all well aware of how things are supposed to work. The part of this morning’s lesson that is most fascinating to me is when we read that, upon asking what they were talking about, the disciples became very quiet. If Mark were writing those same words today, he might include something like the phrase “Busted!” in his account. William Barclay, the great Scottish Bible commentator saw right through their arguing. He wrote: “*When he asked them what they had been arguing about they had nothing to say. It was the silence of shame. They had no defense. It is strange how a thing takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of Jesus. So long as they thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be the greatest seemed fair*

⁵ Ibid, p. 32

⁶ Ibid. p. 34

enough, but when the argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all of its unworthiness.”⁷

Now if you are a youth, I hope you will pay attention to what I am about to say. It is important. And if you are an adult, I would like you to pay attention as well—not only because it is important, but also because our young people model their faith after what they see you do. If that doesn’t catch your attention, I don’t know what will. Any way, this is a good time for all of you to listen. A couple chapters after this one, Mark wrote that Jesus said this to the twelve: “[*This*] is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and to give away his life in exchange for many who are lost.” In other words, when Jesus took the time to explain his reason for coming among us, he was very simple and direct: to serve and to give. Not to be served. Not to grab the spotlight in the center ring. Not to make a name or become successful or famous or powerful or idolized. Jesus came to serve. That is why he said to the disciples, “*So you want first place? Then take last place. Be the servant of all.*” When Jesus took the time to explain what he wanted his followers to do, he was just as simple and direct: to serve and to give. Not to be served. Not to grab the spotlight in the center ring. Not to make a name or become successful or famous or powerful or idolized. Jesus wants his followers to serve. Jesus blazed the path. Now he asks his follower to do exactly the same. Whether we are young or whether we are old, whether we just started to follow or whether we have been following for quite some time, we are called to be servants.

I read somewhere that when Muhammad Ali’s autobiography came out, appropriately titled I Am the Greatest, he attended a book signing at which there was a press conference. He was being his usual colorful self. This was long before Parkinson’s disease robbed him of so much how we best remember him. Anyway, at the press conference, one sportswriter asked him, “When you say you are the greatest, do you mean the greatest fighter or the greatest human being?” Ali responded by saying, “I mean that I am the greatest boxer. I will go down as the greatest boxer of all time.” Not

⁷ William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, The Daily Study Bible, Revised Edition, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 222

satisfied, the sportswriter pushed a little more. He asked, “Do you think that fifty years from now people will still say that you are the greatest?” Ali’s answer was both surprising and worth remembering. After a moment of reflection, he said something that sounded almost biblical, “Fifty years from now everyone in this room will be dead. Nobody will remember what a great boxer I was. The only way I will not be forgotten is if I can do something to help my people.” Boxers come and boxers go, you see, but true servants will live on forever. Or in other words, ***“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and a servant to all.”***