

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2009
Mark 10:32-45

“Serving and Sacrificing”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

The words that appear in our theme this morning are words that do not necessarily enjoy wide approval in our society (or in the world for that matter). As I was considering this theme I thought first of using the nouns forms of the words—service and sacrifice. That would have been okay but verbal noun forms suggest participation and action—Serving and Sacrificing. They are an invitation for us to think about the meaning of these words. It may be of some interest that a reporter at the presidential press conference last week asked President Obama what he thought about calling upon Americans to sacrifice. There were somewhat mixed reactions to the president’s response. In contrast, the Epistle and Gospel lessons for this week in Lent give us a great deal to consider in connection with these words as well. As we meditate on them, perhaps the most important questions should be: Who is serving? Who is sacrificing? May the Spirit of God use His word as we consider that.

I. The Context

To thoroughly understand the concepts of serving and sacrificing, we need to consider them in the context of the opening words of the Gospel for today. Jesus is very forthright in predicting his suffering and death. “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.” This is the third time in the Gospel of St. Mark that Jesus makes a prediction of his passion. He cannot be more clear. The first time he does so, Peter rebukes him. The second time, it states that the disciples do not understand and are afraid to ask him about it. This time, Jesus’ prediction is followed by the request of James and John to sit at his right and left hand in his glory. Perhaps their request was based upon the fact that Jesus had stated that he would rise from the dead, but it is apparent from Jesus’ response to them that they had the wrong idea entirely. He speaks to this mistaken view: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Jesus is here speaking of the cup of suffering. We read in the 14th chapter of the Gospel of Mark that when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed that if it were possible that his Father might remove this cup from him. Yet he also prays “Not my will but yours be done” (Cf. The cup at the very top of the Gethsemane window) And when Jesus speaks of the baptism with which he will be baptized he is speaking of his death. St. Paul alludes to that when he writes in Romans 6: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” James and John respond still not fully comprehending the words of their Lord, “We are able.”

Jesus response is full of power--The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized ... Yes, James would be the first of the twelve apostles to suffer a martyr's death at the behest of Herod and John, though the longest lived of the 12, would write from his exile on Patmos, "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance." But Jesus has more to say. He cannot grant their request, "For to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it for those for whom it has been prepared." A Lutheran professor once shared the thought that he believed Jesus was here referring to the two criminals who would be crucified with him, one on his left and the other on his right. If so, the suffering theme of our Lord's message is very clear.

II. A Lesson in Serving

But that was not the end of it. The other disciples have been listening in on the conversation and they become angry at James and John. Perhaps they were angry because they had not asked first or because Jesus' answer showed them that they as well would not be granted the positions of honor. Jesus needs to speak to all of them. Listen again to his words: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus tells his disciples what their discipleship really means. It is not an attitude of arrogance or superiority, but one of service. He asks them to be servants and slaves. Not that may not be a popular word to hear. Older translations of this text use the word "minister" to describe the servant. A minister serves. And Jesus reminds us all, his modern day disciples, that we should be serving.

III. Serving and Sacrificing

But of course, to truly understand serving we must understand sacrificing. And we need to see the true foundation of these thoughts. Jesus says it so clearly: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." Here is the greatness of Christ's ministry and service. Here is the purpose for his prediction at the beginning of our text of his suffering and death. He gave His life. St. Paul writes of Him that He "made himself of no reputation and took upon himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness and men, and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." There is the message of Lent. The message of the cross set before us. The sacrificing Servant in saving us is serving.

The same thought is expressed in the Epistle for this day from the letter to the Hebrews. There we hear of the high priest who is not obligated to offer sacrifices for his own sins, but rather by His perfect obedience offers up himself as the sacrifice. In the process, he has become the source of eternal salvation to all ...

IV. Our Serving and Sacrificing

And in him, and through him, Jesus calls on us to be serving. And sacrificing. As I said at the beginning those are not popular words in our day. But in our lives in Christ we are serving. We are serving him here in worship. We serve him in whatever task the Lord places before us. Maybe we think too hard or try too hard. Just serve. As the closing words to the explanation of the Second Article remind us: That I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." But there is that sacrificing word as well. Perhaps we think that too difficult a thing. But we are called upon to sacrifice as well. Several weeks ago the Gospel lesson reminded us, whoever would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. One cannot take up a cross without sacrificing. We live under and the cross and in view of the cross. I just finished reading a book about life in East Germany in the days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was constant persecution even though it was often not of the violent kind. Sometimes it was just the numbing oppression of the communist bureaucracy. But people who were Christians knew they would not have the best jobs or attend the university. Their children would not advance far if they were known to take Christian instruction. But they served. And countless others knew they were Christians and would come to them for counsel and advice for love and help. It happened again and again. In their sacrificing they were serving. Let us pray that the Lord would give us the same strength to serve and in serving to remember him who gave his life as a ransom for many.

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated Lord to thee
Take my moments and my days
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.