

What Is Love?

Sermon preached by Marlena Graves

Olentangy Church

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John 13:12-17, 34-35

12When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. 13”You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. 15I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.34”A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Mark 10:43-45

43Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. 44And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. 45For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Sermon

Many people say that they’d like to be self-employed, in order not to have to answer to anyone but themselves. If you’re self-employed, you set your own schedule and you decide what you’re going to do. The only person you have breathing down your back is you. You answer to your customers if something goes wrong. If you’re business grows, you decide who to hire and who to fire and perhaps when to retire and pass the baton to someone else. I realize there are cons to being self-employed, but I was just thinking about some of the benefits.

Some of us act as if we’re self-employed servants in the kingdom of God and as if God is our employee. To put it another way, we act as if we’re the Master and he is the servant. At least that is what I discovered a few years ago after thinking about Mark 9:35 and others verses like it.

In Mark chapter 9, Jesus is transfigured with Peter, James, and John as witnesses. After the transfiguration he and the three disciples come down from the mount to find that the rest of the disciples couldn’t cast out an evil spirit. After Jesus casts out the spirit and tells them that some of these spirits come out only by prayer and fasting, they start their foot tour to Capernaum. On the way, all save Jesus got into a hushed verbal fist-fight — a quietly incendiary debate about which one of them was the greatest disciple, about which one of them was Jesus’ favorite, superior to all the rest, excelling in discipleship. I can imagine Peter James and John thinking, “Well of course we’re among the greatest. We saw him transfigured, but he told us to keep it on the down low. We’ve got a corner on the market of greatness, the rest of you don’t know what we know and haven’t seen what we’ve seen.” But perhaps James or John, whom Jesus called Sons of Thunder in Mark 3 piped up with, “You guys certainly can’t be the best disciples, you were beside yourselves in trying to drive out that evil spirit. You couldn’t even do it.” Apparently Jesus could tell they were arguing, sort of like when you stumble upon a couple who obviously has been arguing but are trying to play it cool, playing it off, acting like everything is normal until you’re out of earshot and out of the way. The disciples didn’t do a good job of disguising their argument.

So when they got to the house in Capernaum, probably their home base, he asks, “What were you arguing about?” You could hear a pin drop, crickets chirping, the wind in the trees, but you couldn’t hear their answer because they didn’t give one. And that is where we get to Mark 9:35, the verse I’ve been thinking about for a while. In that verse Jesus says, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and

servant of all.” Years ago, I understood what Jesus was literally saying: if you want to be first in God’s Kingdom you’ve got to be last, the servant of all. Pretty simple right?

But what does that mean really, in daily life? Hmmmm. I wonder, because the disciples didn’t get it right away and they were with Jesus day in and day out for three years. Check out Mark 10. Right after Jesus laid out the great reversal in the Kingdom of God in Mark 9:35—those that desire to be first shall be last and the servant of all—this is what happens. James and John ask Jesus if they can sit on either side of him in glory, when his kingdom comes. In Matthew’s gospel, it is their mother who asks Jesus. Interestingly enough, their mother seemed to travel with the band of disciples. Seems she wanted her sons to make it big time when Jesus came into his kingdom. Whether she got that into their heads or they had it in their own heads without her prodding, mother and sons wanted power, glory, and to be first in Jesus’ kingdom. Perhaps they thought that they’d left all, left their livelihood and deserved much in the coming kingdom. After all, Jesus had alluded to that in other places. Jesus’ response to them, is similar to the responses he gave throughout the gospels when speaking of serving. “It’s not my place to grant those positions. You two will suffer just like me.” Then he turns to the rest of the disciples (who he called together knowing they were ticked off when they found out about James and John and their mother’s request) and says:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.

A couple years ago, I recalled telling the Lord that I loved him and that the desire of my heart was to follow him closely. I remember telling him that I did understand the verses in John that said, “if you love me you obey my commandments”. I thought I was being obedient. But then, he called me to do something I didn’t want to. Something that was very trying and hard on me. It was at that time that I sensed him telling me, “Marlena, you don’t want to be the servant of all. You want to be master and call the shots in your life. You want to decide how and when you will serve me and who you will serve. You want to be master and want me to be the servant. I am not at your service (although I serve you), you are at mine. That is what it means to love me and follow me. You obey, you don’t choose your assignments. I make them and you are to lovingly and joyfully obey.” I was shocked to discover the true state of my soul.

Loving God with all our hearts, souls, and minds and our neighbors as ourselves—the two greatest commandments given to us by God—entails that we will be servants. We will be slaves to all. As Jesus bent down to wash the disciples feet he lowered himself. In lowering himself, he put himself in a vulnerable, nearly defenseless position. In the upper room, he could’ve been kicked, spat upon, or beaten by his disciples. He soon would be by Roman soldiers. In his life, we see that though he was the Lord God, completely almighty, he became human—he lowered himself (as Philippians 2 says) and did not lord it over anyone. It is really hard to be a servant, to be a slave to all. It doesn’t come naturally. And it is much more difficult for some of us than others or us. We can barely serve our own families. Being a servant is humiliating. It requires giving up our lives, losing the lives we think we want. But Jesus says in losing our lives we find them.

There is hope for those of us who have a proclivity to be served instead of a proclivity to serve. We see that James and John ended up becoming great servants in the early church. Commentators think that James was executed sometime between A.D. 41-44. So, he gave up his life for Jesus in whom he believed. John became known for his love and was persecuted and banished to Patmos and was also a New Testament author. As James and John followed Jesus and began to understand the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection, it seems that they started to get it. Whether or not they’re at the right and left hand of Jesus remains to be seen. But from their example, we realize there is hope for those of us who don’t get it, those of us who are hard of heart, selfish and self-absorbed, those of us who want to be masters.

We cannot serve God at our own convenience with the option of turning down his requests when we want to. That is bad for us and bad for others. Sometimes elementary aged children, teenagers, and young adults think, "I'll serve Jesus and others when I am older. I am too young." Seniors think "I've served Jesus, I am old, my body doesn't work, I am retired. I've done my duty already." That's the wrong way to think. We're not ever too old or too young to love God and love others by serving them. Loving and serving God and others starts at home. It often ends up being those things that we don't want to do that is of most service to others. In daily life, being a servant or slave isn't heroic. But it is being lovingly obedient--obedient with a good spirit.

And being a slave and servant of all doesn't mean that we have to burn ourselves out, to have no boundaries, but it does mean we have to obey God—obey what he has revealed in Scripture and when he calls us to do something. That call maybe through the request of another person. And we may get tired as we serve.

So what is love? What does it mean to love one another? We see it from the Scripture readings. Loving one another means loving service. And it is not just outward. Psalm 15 shows us that we can't even think badly about one another in our hearts. It is a high calling, but possible through the grace of God. Are we our own bosses in the kingdom of God or are we truly serving God?