

Homily – The Heart of a Servant

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This past Sunday we elected four new members to our Vestry or governing board. I am grateful for Marcia, Steve, Jim, and Brian. I am grateful for their willingness to serve our community, and I look forward to serving with them as we try to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County. As we serve together, I wonder what new things we will embrace, and I wonder what old things we will keep doing.

Like a lot of the roles that we have here at St. Barnabas we have a job description for what it means to be a vestry member. One of the qualities called out is a willingness to be a servant leader. We are not hierarchal. Vestry members are not here to exercise power and control. We are here to serve each other, and we highly value servant leadership. Our Sr. Warden and Jr. Warden are the two vestry members that are called into Vestry leadership roles. Their job description highlights the following characteristic. Have an ability to "check one's ego at the door," to be a servant of the people without a need to be the "most important person" in the congregation or to be the one with the right answers to everything. I know from my own personal experience in trying to be a servant leader, that it is wonderfully rewarding, but sometimes I stumble and get it wrong. Sometimes my ego gets in the way, and the best thing to do is to be mindful that the ego is dominating again, and try to be better the next time. God, heal me from my ego, and while you are at it heal all of us from our egos. Wouldn't that be nice. Heal us from our egos.

Now, today's gospel reading, like last week's gospel reading, is about healing, healing from sickness, diseases and demons. I shared last week, that I have no clue what is meant by demons, whether it is physical sickness, mental ailment, trauma held in the body or even independently willed beings that take over. Be that as it may, Jesus sees how many have had their lives disrupted, he has compassion, and he heals them. I know that when I have been healed from things that afflict me, I am grateful. I am grateful to the nurses, aides, and doctors. I am grateful for medicines and medical technology. I am grateful for medical insurance, and I thank God. Thank you God for healing.

In today's Gospel reading the first person healed is not given a name but she is Simon's mother-in-law. We heard read, "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He, Jesus, came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." This story is a little problematic, for in twenty-first century America, our first reaction to this story

is to recognize how patriarchal and misogynistic it is. Let's heal the one woman, so that she can serve the men.

Now there are other parts of the healing we can also focus on. First, the reaction of the woman to her healing was to serve. She models something outstanding for us. When we are healed, or blessed, or given a gift by God, then our first reaction should be to serve God and others. Actually we should use any excuse to serve for service helps us get outside ourselves, it helps to dampen our self-centeredness, the opposite of love. It changes our hearts for the better, and it changes the world for the better. Last week someone asked me about the strengths of our community here at St. Barnabas. I think one of the primary strengths is the breadth of folks who step up to serve and volunteer. Most churches I have been a part of have about ten percent of the folks who get things done. However, here at St. Barnabas I think it is about forty percent of folks who serve in ministry. Last week in our Annual Meeting packet we listed our ministries and our ministry leads. There are a lot of names listed. And those names are just the leads of each ministry. Many of you participate in ministries without needing to lead. One of my favorite spiritual gifts is the gift of helping. These are the people who are always asking how they can help. Thank you God for all the people who help at St. Barnabas. I trust your hearts are lifted by serving God and others.

Three weeks ago, my mother made an interesting point about service, or maybe I should say she made another interesting point. She said that one of the things she regrets about this time of the Coronavirus is that it is harder to serve. In the past, she served in a variety of ways at her church, at her local hospital, and with the community theater group. Serving God and others is not as easy these days. It has moved online. Instead of big things, serving has often become the little things. The phone call, the postcard, all the other ways that we connect and say "I see you to one another." Meaningful service is saying "you are still part of my life, and I hope I am part of yours." I wonder if part of the stir crazy feeling we have is due to the changes in our opportunities to serve God and others. What new ways have you found to serve? I would be curious to hear from you about how you feel your heart is being lifted by new ways of serving. Maybe that's something we need to embrace as a church, all the new ways to serve God and others.

And here is another link between healing and serving that I want to explore with you. My dad used to tell the story about a bargain he made with God to heal my brother from seizures. It must have worked for I don't remember my brother having seizures. I also don't remember what my dad told God he would start doing, but bargaining with God is something that I have done. I bet you have as well. God if I get this job, then I will write a big check to the church. God, if you heal my loved one from cancer, then I will dedicate my life to serving the homeless. God if you give me

more money I will spend it on serving you. We all have tried to make bargains with God, and if that is what is on your mind, then say it to God. Sometimes when I am praying aloud with someone, I will throw a bargain in. I thought it and God already knows it so why clean up my prayer. However, and you knew there was a however, we do not have a transactional God. We can't say the magic words, or do the magic deeds and God responds with beneficence. Jesus did not die on the Cross as a bargain. Jesus gave himself freely and with no strings attached. When I am in a bad place, I try to bargain with God. But, the better place is to see the blessings and healing that we already have from God, and not wait for something in the future. Let me start now to give money or spending it on serving God. Let me begin now to serve the homeless, without getting what I want first. Jesus calls us to serve God and others.

Later in the Gospel according to Mark, James and John are asking for the honor of sitting beside him in glory. In Mark 10 it is written "So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus calls us to serve God and others.

A few weeks ago, I shared with you the Apostle Paul's great servant song as found in his letter to the Philippians. Let me read it to you again. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." As his followers, this is the way of love towards which Jesus is calling us, self-giving, self-emptying, and humble. This is the light that is brought into the world by Jesus, and it is a light that is given to us freely so that we might share this light and love with others. Jesus calls us to serve God and others.

This past week in our Tuesday morning Bible Study we reviewed four other servant songs that are found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. In 600 BC the Babylonians began a series of deportations of the leading families of Judea. The Hebrews were forcefully removed to foreign lands, and weren't allowed to begin returning home for

about sixty years. The parts of Book of Isaiah with the four servant songs was probably written during the exile or shortly after the return. No one knows who the servant songs are written about. Christians read them and see Jesus. While the Holy Spirit of God was probably inspiring the writers of Isaiah to give us a foretaste of Jesus, the writers may have also been saying that the Hebrew people as a group are the great servant. During their exile it would make sense that the Hebrews became the servants, gardeners, and maids in the foreign lands. That is certainly what has happened to those that have come to America from other lands. Earlier parts of the Book of Isaiah say that the Hebrew people had become haughty and self-centered. They had focused on their own rights and privileges, and they had stopped taking care of the widow and the orphan. They had stopped following God's ways. Having their privileges removed certainly brought down the leading Hebrew family. Becoming the servants, gardeners and maids in a foreign land would have retaught them humility. And, it makes sense to me that the Hebrews in a foreign land would start lifting up the virtues of being a servant and writings songs about servants. Maybe the necessary suffering of exile led the Hebrews to the death of the ego and the false self. There is deep spiritual benefit and value in being a servant. Instead of praying that we never be brought low, that we never become the servant, let us voluntarily become the servant. Let us serve God and others.

We don't know her name, but we know Simon's mother-in-law served. It is through serving that we model for others what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And, it is through serving that we change our own hearts and the hearts of others. Plus, it makes the world a better place. Choose to serve God and others.