

Mark 10:35-45

I believe most of you here today remember when gas stations were full service. You'd pull in and be greeted by a man who pumped your gas, offered to check your oil, wash your windows.... They are a thing of the past, something gone by the wayside in order to save money. The same thing is happening with check out lines... a good many of them are also self-service. And full service banks are also becoming a thing of the past with many people using online banking services, even for loans, and, if they need cash, going to an ATM. Back in the day, whenever we visited a full service gas station or bank, we knew that our needs would be met.

However, full service is not necessarily the key to happiness according to Jesus. When the two disciples, James and John, good inner circle disciples, came to Jesus to ask him to give them what they wanted, he, at first, asked them what it was they wanted him to do for them. James and John said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 37). They wanted the most coveted seats in the house.

But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (v. 38). Drink the cup? I don't think they realized what Jesus meant when he asked them if they could drink the cup. They most likely thought of a glass of wine. Be baptized with the baptism? They were already baptized. So the two brothers replied, "We are able."

Then Jesus says to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared" (vv. 39-40). Jesus predicted that they will suffer just as he will suffer, drinking the same cup and receiving the same baptism. But he went on to say that he is not the one who will assign the seating in the dominion of God. Only God prepares the final seating chart.

Jesus makes it clear that the dominion of God is not a full-service restaurant. You don't get to make a reservation for the best table, and then have a server meet your needs and satisfy your desires. Money, power and status do not put you at a seat where you can see and be seen. Jesus attaches a very different meaning to "full-service." And his meaning is the exact opposite of what most of us expect.

The 10 other disciples became angry with James and John, probably because they felt that the two were pushing ahead of them in the line to the dominion of God, or maybe they were angry because the two brothers thought of asking first, when they all would like those honored seats. Jesus called the disciples together to straighten them out. He said, "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; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (vv. 42-44).

In the kingdoms of the world, power-people are tyrants. They throw around their money, status and power, and put themselves on display. But in the dominion of God, power people are servants. Those who wish to be great must devote themselves to serving the people around them. Jesus turns our idea of full-service completely on its head. Full service does not mean that your needs are met, and your desires are satisfied. No, full-service means that you serve others fully.

Author Anne Lamott admires a friend who picks up litter as they walk along together. The woman is 84, short and sturdy, and she puts the small items in a cloth bag attached to her belt. The friend says, "I'm picking up micro litter, bottle caps and bits of wrappers. I try to help where I can." Trying to help where you can is part of living a "full-service life."

Lamott remembers the love and service shown by her mother. When Anne was growing up, her mother showed love and service by "taking modest bouquets and baked goods to [those she knew were] in decline. Some were sunk into cranky dementia, alcoholism and random disorders," says Lamott. "But my mom showed up for [them]. She taught me that service makes me happy."

She's right: Service makes us happy. We think that being served will make us happy, but the happiness found there is fleeting. We might go to a good restaurant, have a great meal, leave a tip for excellent service, and then ... the next day we are hungry. Only serving others gives us a satisfaction that lasts.

Lamott says, "We know by a certain age the 'great palace lies' of the culture." By "great palace lies" she means the lies that possession, achievements and positions will make us happy. The "palace lies" are what motivate the rulers of the gentiles to lord it over the people of the land. But Lamott knows that it is a lie to believe that if you buy, do or achieve certain things, you will be happy and rich. "Nope," she concludes. "Love and service make us rich."

Jesus would agree with her, 100%. A full-service life is an existence devoted completely to service. Happiness and greatness come not from achievement and wealth, but from trying to help others and make the world a better place. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would agree with her as well. He made this point in one of his last sermons, "The Drum Major Instinct," preached on the story of James and John and Jesus. "Everybody can be great," he said, "because anybody can serve."

Acts of service do not have to be gigantic to be great. In fact, they can be quite small. I read where a pastor, Pastor Tom Berlin, talks about a woman in his church named Franki, who sends notes of encouragement. "I have received several of these notes over the years," writes Pastor Tom. "They often show remarkable timing. They arrive on a day when I can use a kind word or an expression of appreciation. Franki has a way of seeing things in me that I don't see in myself."

For Franki, writing notes is an act of service. She writes them every Sunday night after church, 20-25 a week. And why does she do it? She says, "I thought it would be nice if people knew that I cared for them and loved them."

Showing people that you care for them and love them. That's the heart of living a full-service life. And while Franki does not do it to receive praise and thanks, she is responding to the words of Jesus, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (v. 43).

Full-service banks, gas stations, and cashiers are going out of style. But not full-service people, who are following the example of Jesus. He said that he "came not to be served but to serve" (v. 45).

The same is true for anyone who wants to find the deep satisfaction that comes from service.

All glory be to God.