

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 18, 2009, Rev. Mary S. Trainor

Isaiah 53: 4-12; Psalm 91; Hebrews 5: 1-10; Mark 10: 35-45

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

This verse from the Bible, the last verse in your Gospel for today, has been said by many commentators to be THE one verse that captures the essence of the Gospel message. It has two important parts, the 1st is about service and the 2nd is about ransom. These two parts are separate but closely interrelated. Let’s take a look at both this morning, the last one first: *Jesus came to give his life a ransom for many.*

What does this mean....well, we are included in the *“many”*—it is us He gave His life for as a ransom. What does *“ransom”* mean in this context? The Greek word for ransom is *lutron*, which means to unbind, to release, to set free. We are doomed, and He rescued us

Many years ago, I heard this passage preached on by an Episcopal bishop and I will never forget that sermon. He said the following to us in the congregation, **“You are a condemned prisoner with a noose tightly wound around your neck. You are there with the executioner. But then and there you accept Jesus into your heart, and Jesus in the flesh comes up right to you and slips that noose gently from around your neck. Then, He leads you away by the hand to a new life.”** I found this imagery of the noose grotesque and shocking; I did not like it, I was offended. So, I went and studied what Jesus meant when He said that He came to give his life as a ransom for me. To my dismay, I found that yes it is shocking but yes, it is true. John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* That life that Jesus offers begins when we accept Jesus, and we are set free from all that binds us. This rescue is secured through the cross. The price has been paid, the noose is removed from around our necks and we are saved by grace through faith. We no longer need to make endless attempts to secure salvation for ourselves.

How are we to react to this news? There is only one response: thanks and praise to God. Heard this before? Oh yes, look now at the Book of Common Prayer, p. 363....we hear this almost every Sunday in Eucharistic Prayer A, **“We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.”** We remember what God has done for us, and we give thanks and praise. We cannot possibly pay God back for freeing us, but we can praise and be thankful.

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

So, how about the 2nd part of this verse? *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.* And right before this, Jesus said that *“to become great we must be servants.”* Now, wait just a minute. We just heard that we were saved by Jesus’ action of unbinding, and so we don’t have to earn our way to salvation. So, why do we have to serve? Becoming a Christian is one thing, but becoming a servant is a whole other thing. None of us would willingly become servants. A servant is the lowest of the low in society, so we would just as soon ignore this part of the message.

After all, in our society we judge success by the amount of service we can afford – the very successful get lots of service. You know, the more expensive the restaurant the more servers you have. Successful business people who fly get to go to special airline clubs, with all kinds of service, and don’t have to stand in lines. Whether we perceive or acknowledge it or not, we have an implicit ranking system in our society.

Several years ago, I was a manager at a National Laboratory. We went through a time of tightening the Government’s budget and managers were told to expect to have to lay people off. In anticipation of that, I was directed to rank my employees -- to put a number next to each one, associated with their value to the organization. It was a dreadful exercise to have to do, and it is one that has been repeated in many businesses in the past year because of the economic downturn. The people at the bottom of the list were the first to go in the downsizing. Who were the people who ended up on the bottom of the list? They were the less educated, the ones who could be replaced easily, the service people. In that time, I saw people who considered themselves as part of “us” become “them.” Our various cultures, including the church, can be reduced to the “ins” and the “outs.” We all want to be one of the “ins.” This implicit ranking of people based on power has existed since the beginning.

James and John wanted to be part of the “in” group too, a high ranking!. They came to Jesus asking for for, *one to be on His right and one on His left*. They wanted to be number 1 and 2, and have the rest be numbers 3-12. This was after the Transfiguration – they knew Jesus was about glory, and glory meant power. They wanted a piece of that power Jesus represented. Now understand, that at this point they had no clue about what that power was about. Jesus had talked about the nature of His Kingdom, but they did not get it yet – oh, they would get it later – but not yet.

Jesus responded to James and John gently, and tried to help them understand what was going to be required of a follower of His. Sure there would be joy and peace and celebration, but there would also be suffering and pain and frustration. James and John were focused on themselves, and Jesus responded that it is not about being served but about serving. James and John were looking towards position power and Jesus was looking towards the cross.

Our OT reading from Isaiah 53 captures this this downward mobility of Jesus, the suffering servant. We know the Isaiah 53 words from Handels’s Messiah, **“Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows! He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him. And with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; And the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”** Jesus went from heaven to earth to the cross to the grave all for us, and we are to respond in gratitude with service.

Now, some people assume that our response to God in gratitude through service means that they need to go work with the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta. Some people think this means that they need to put up with being treated badly by others, or need to work really hard to earn their way into Jesus’ heart. None of those are correct interpretations of this Gospel message. As followers of Christ, as those who serve the Lord, we are to share God’s love with others everyday, all the time. A Missionary, Paul Robinson, put it this way, **“Don’t worry about doing something great. Be great by doing what you can where God has placed you.”** **Greatness grows out of service.** Our ability to do this service everyday, all the time, comes under the power of the Holy Spirit. Our ability to do this service everyday from a place of gratitude comes from our mentally living at the foot of the cross. Only through allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to empower us and embolden us, we are able to do things we could not otherwise do. Ephesians 3: 20 sums it up this way, that God’s **“power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”**

Mother Theresa said: **“Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service.”** Here is one example of how she lived that out. One day Mother Teresa went into a grocery store in India and put \$800 worth of groceries into some shopping carts, food that was needed for the starving people that she was caring for. But when she got up to the cashier, she had no money to pay. Instead, she said that she wasn’t going to move out of line, until the people behind her came up with the money to pay for the food. They did and she fed the people.

Now, here in Stevens Point, we don’t need to go to County Market or Copps and do what Mother Theresa didbut we must serve. It is not an option. We cannot say, “I go to worship so I don’t have to serve.” No, Jesus tells us, **that serving is at the heart of who we are as His followers, all the time, every day, out of gratitude.**

- Around here, this looks like committing to help a family in need, even if you are not sure where all the needed resources are going to come from.
- It looks like committing to get the bell tower fixed because it must be fixed, and then having the raffle emerge with the funds to accomplish it afterwards.
- It looks like agreeing to teach Sunday school, even if you are scared.
- It looks like participating in the Oak Ridge and Portage County Home services we have every other week on Thursdays, even if you do not feel comfortable going into those places.
- It looks like initiating a new outreach effort that you hear about, even though you do not know how to go about organizing it.
- If you need help in finding where to serve, just ask Fr. Jim or me. The needs are endless.

Today, Jesus is asking to serve you the cup of His love and feed you the bread of heaven. **“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”**As you accept this love, then you’ll find yourself serving others everyday, all the time, and in that you will find your greatest joy. In thanksgiving and praise, at the foot of the cross, in service, will be your freedom. Alleluia. Amen.