

The phone rings, and immediately the caller asks, “Does Johnny Johnson mow your lawn?” “Why yes,” the man answers. “So does he do a good job?” “Yes, very good.” “Does he show up each week when he’s supposed to?” “Yes.” “Does he rake well and clean the sidewalks afterward?” “Yes.” “And do you feel you are getting your money’s worth?” “Yes.” “So all in all, you’re satisfied with Johnny Johnson’s work?” “Yes,” says the man, “But why do you ask? Who is this anyway?” The caller answers, “This is Johnny Johnson. I’m just checking up on myself to make sure I’m giving good service!”

Now, how’s that for a work ethic?! I can’t swear the story is true, but wouldn’t you like it to be? In fact, wouldn’t you like it to be so true that such an attitude would be common? Oh, how sweet it would be if people were so concerned about giving good service! Of course, we’re not likely to see that happen anytime soon. If anything, this attitude is becoming increasingly rare. These days we’re more likely to find people with an inflated sense of entitlement, aren’t we? People seeking favors and prestige; people who want to *be* served but get huffy when asked *to* serve. So expecting them to care *how well* they serve, much less *check up* on how well they serve – no, we’re not likely to see that happen anytime soon. For many, even for most, service is not a priority. For many, even for most, service is not what makes you great.

But then again, what “many” or “most” think doesn’t really matter, does it? Not in the big scheme of things. There is only One whose opinion ultimately matters. That is God. And not surprisingly, God has a different perspective on all this. Actually, it’s 180° different. To God, service is precisely what makes you great. Mind you, it has to be the right kind of service, offered in the right spirit with the right motives. I mean, we all know people who do nice things with ulterior motives – to earn praise, win sympathy, feel virtuous, or gain leverage over others. Jesus would say, **“They already have their reward.”** But the right kind of service, offered in the right spirit with the right motives – that is something rare and beautiful! And that is what’s great to God.

During His time here on earth, Jesus modeled this greatness perfectly. The image of Him washing the disciples’ feet is just one example among many, and His death on the cross was the purest act of service ever offered. Still, even though He modeled the greatness of service, Jesus had a hard time communicating it to His followers – not because of any flaw in Himself but because of a major flaw in human nature.

For instance, earlier in Mark’s Gospel, we read how Jesus overheard the disciples arguing among themselves over which one was the greatest. They clammed up as Jesus entered the room, but He knew what they were arguing about. He knew all too well. That’s why He made a point of telling them, **“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”**

Jesus was pretty clear, wasn't He? But did that settle the issue? No! At least, not for James and John. In our text, we see them waiting until just the right moment when the others are gone. Then they sneak behind the others' backs and try to make *Jesus* decide who's the greatest by asking Him for places of honor in His kingdom. Talk about chutzpah! These two "sons of thunder" thought they were being so subtle, so smart! **"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."** That actually sounds pretty modern, doesn't it? Never mind us doing whatever God asks. No, no! **"Lord, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."** That, in a nutshell, is where religion too often goes wrong! But I digress. Jesus didn't take the bait, of course: **"What is it you want me to do for you?"** When they told Him they wanted to sit beside Him in glory, Jesus showed great patience: **"You do not know what you are asking."** And when they kept at it, insisting they did know what they were asking, Jesus showed great restraint. **"To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."**

So again, Jesus was pretty clear, wasn't He? But did *that* settle the issue? No! Eventually, the other disciples found out, and man, did they get angry! So angry, that even an amateur psychologist could see what was really going on inside them. Nothing provokes more righteous indignation than someone pulling a stunt you would have liked to pull – but didn't have the guts – and seeing it blow up in their face! The others probably thought: *What miserable sneaks! How dare they ask for such positions? Especially when I'm far more entitled!* To be honest, the other disciples were no better than James and John. They had the same weakness, the same flaw, the same yearning to be great. And they were just as clueless about what's great to God. So yet again – yet again! – Jesus taught with words what they should have been able to learn from His example: **"You know that among the Gentiles...their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it must not be so among you. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants 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 as a ransom for many."**

So what do you think? Did *that* settle the issue? Again, the answer is no. Not for them. Not for those who came after them. Not for us today. Selfishness is too deeply entrenched for this not to be an ongoing battle for every Christian – an ongoing battle within ourselves, I should say, to conquer selfishness, to become servants; to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ.

But think what history might have been like if Christians *had* followed Jesus' example – or even Johnny Johnson's! How different our textbooks would be if medieval rulers had checked up on themselves to make sure they were giving good service! Or if popes and bishops had checked up on themselves to make sure they were giving good service! Or if televangelists had checked up on themselves to make sure they were giving good service! For that matter, think how different our textbooks would be if the average pastor and each person in

the pew had checked up on themselves to make sure they were giving good service! How different our world would be! Gone would be the lame excuse, *“There are too many hypocrites in the church.”* Our credibility would be too compelling! Gone would any reason to say, *“People don’t care what you know till they know that you care.”* Our compassion would be too clear! People might say, *“What’s with those folks? It’s just not normal to be so good and giving!”* But I think we’d be able to handle that. We’d be able to handle most anything if we made a point of seeking what’s great to God!

We’d even be able to handle – dare I say it? We’d even be able to handle a controversy like the one we’re facing with the ELCA – handle it with grace, with class. And we will handle it that way – if we make a point of seeking what’s great to God.

I have to tell you, the last few weeks I’ve been thinking a lot about another controversy – one I went through in another Lutheran denomination some 35 years ago. I was a senior in college already planning for seminary, and there was a major ruckus over – wouldn’t you know? – Scriptural authority. Back then the problem was adding to what Scripture says, not subtracting from it, but the issue was similar and just as important. Now, I can honestly say it didn’t bother me that this issue was being debated. Such things need to be debated. That’s healthy. But what did bother me – in fact, shook me to the core – was how some people behaved, how badly they treated others; the lying, innuendo, shunning, rumor-mongering, manipulation, jockeying for position. How deeply they betrayed the Christian values they sought to defend!

I learned a lesson back then that has stuck with me ever since. It’s okay to think you are right and that someone else is wrong. We’re not relativists. There *is* a right and a wrong, and saying that is not “judging” or “unloving” in itself. But thanks to human selfishness, what can happen all too quickly is that the debate turns into a personality contest. Right and wrong turn into “us” and “them,” “friend” and “foe,” “good guys” and “bad guys,” even the “righteous” versus “the evil.” And once that happens, what starts to matter more and more is not the truth but who wins and who loses. And once you’ve gotten to that point, what’s the next step? Justifying any means to beat the “bad guys”? Showing contempt for your “foes”? Allowing yourself to shun, vilify them, even hate those you’ve painted as “evil”? It’s a slippery slope, my friends. It’s all too slippery! I’ve seen how slippery it is – even for people who should know better. And make no mistake: *that* is what causes division. Not debating. Not disagreeing. What’s divisive is letting human selfishness dictate our behavior and short-circuit our Christian values. There are no winners, only losers, when we do not seek what’s great to God.

So here most of all, what’s called for is a servant’s mind, a servant’s heart. At such times, we need to love each other more, not less. We need to pray for each other more, not less. We need to reach out to each other more, not less. And if

we have a problem with each other, we need to handle it the way Jesus taught us in Matthew 18 – going to each other privately, working out the problem if we can, before sharing our complaints with anyone else. Those who want to be served will say, “But other folks should come to me.” Those who want to be served will say, “But my feelings got hurt.” Those who want to be served will say, “What matters most is getting my way. Winning!” But that’s not how it is when we have a servant’s mind, a servant’s heart. We know there are things that matter far more! Conducting ourselves honorably. Maintaining our integrity. Being guided by faith, not fear. Treating each other as we wish to be treated. Seeking God’s will, even if it conflicts with our own. And never letting ourselves forget that this is a person we’re dealing with, not an object; this is a fragile human being like ourselves; this a precious child of God, whom we’re not called to defeat or dismiss but to serve in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

No one cared more than Jesus about sticking up for the truth. He came to “**bear witness to the truth.**” He promised “**the truth will make**” us “**free.**” Yet even so, or perhaps for that very reason, Jesus never let *being* “right” excuse us from *behaving* “right.” To the contrary! Jesus always took the high road, and He taught us to do the same – even if it means turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, giving beyond what’s reasonable to give. That’s what it means to be His disciples. That’s what it means to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Him. That’s what it means to love one another as He has loved us.

Times like these test us to the core. In the heat of the moment, our true character comes out, showing who we really are deep down inside...and where we need to grow. That’s all the more reason to check up on ourselves and make sure we are giving good service! We may not be able to choose what things we’ll face in life, but we can choose *how* we will face them. Today Jesus invites us to face our situation with steadfast faith *and* a compassionate spirit – with both, not just one or the other. He invites us to face our situation with a servant mind, a servant heart, for that is what’s great to God. Amen.