

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
March 22 & 23, 2014
Lee Hanssen
Every Day: The Active Gospel
Mark 10:35-45**

My name is Lee Hanssen and I serve here as the Director of Student Ministries. A couple of months ago I found myself in a new place that I didn't really know what to do with. So I called a good friend of mine, one of our elders, Bob Tinsley, who sits on an advisory board for our Student Ministries staff, and asked him if we could grab a bite to eat. I sat down with him and explained this new stage of life that I was experiencing. It's an interesting stage. I've been in ministry for almost ten years. I don't feel like I'm a fresh new leader anymore. I'm working on my master's in grad school and I have a little bit of ministry under my belt, but I also don't feel like I'm quite fully an adult yet. I don't know when that will happen, but I don't think it's now. I was chatting with Bob about how, when I first got into ministry, I felt so celebrated. I was constantly receiving all sorts of affirmation and praise, and new opportunities, and it was exciting. It's not that any of those things don't happen anymore, but it just feels different and I'm experiencing that in new ways.

I was listening as Bob responded to me, sharing that this is a really good thing as I grow in Christ-like leadership and servant leadership. He said, "Lee, you're probably going to receive less and less direct feedback and less and less direct praise." I stopped and let that sink in. I looked at him and said, "Bob, that sucks!" I didn't really say that, but that was what I was thinking. And while I ascribe to that, like I get that and I think that's good and I think it's healthy to move out of that stage, at the same time, it's been really hard. When I was constantly receiving praise and affirmation, I felt a little bit like the shiny new toy. It made me feel important and it made me feel special. If I'm really honest, I think the ugliest places in my heart came not just from feeling important and special, but from feeling more important and special than other people, and I liked it. That is not my heart and it certainly is not Jesus' heart for my life, but it's just true. As I thought about it even more and agreed with Bob, I recognized that it's a good thing, a healthy thing, but it's kind of like...I'm angry I didn't get invited to the party that I don't really want to be at anyway.

I don't think that's just a *me* thing. I think it's an *us* thing. When we think about our society and our culture and the way this world works, everything we know is built around achieving status and position, isn't it? We have VIP nightclubs and red carpet events for celebrities. We DVR shows on TV when we can't watch them. We have first class airline seats and special lines for those who can afford to fly that way. We have executive country clubs. Certain neighborhoods that people dream of living in have a certain stigma. We shop at expensive stores when a store across the street without the name brand has the same thing. Our whole society is built around achieving status and position and we spend much of our time and energy pursuing these things. They make us feel good and they make us feel important and special and unique.

I'm not demonizing these things or saying any of them alone are bad. They are good things. They are meant for our enjoyment and for our pleasure and that's okay, but where the problem comes is that these things take a place in our lives and in our hearts that they shouldn't. They don't just become things we enjoy; they become ways by which we measure our worth. They become things that we use to identify who we are. What's even scarier is when we do that with *ourselves*. When we use these things to define *us*, we begin to define other people by what they have and the status they achieve and the positions they have.

As you know, we are in this Gospel series, and they asked me to talk today about being a servant and serving. Maybe you've heard by now, the word *Gospel* means good news. That's what that word *Gospel* literally means. In thinking about being a servant and putting others before me, about saying *no* to myself so that someone else can have something, I'm wondering, what's the good news in that? Why is that good news for me?

I think about what the world says is good news. The world tells us it's good news when you're on that VIP list. The world tells us it's good news when you've made it and can finally afford to move into that neighborhood you've always dreamed of. The world tells you it's good news when you finally arrive at the place on top. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the good news that Jesus shares says that the way to the top is really the way to the bottom. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ says that when we identify with Him as a Suffering Servant, we'll find lasting joy and peace that we will not find anywhere else. The good news of Jesus Christ says when we let go of our need for status and recognition, we will find great freedom—and that is good news to my heart!

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all paint a different picture of Jesus. They all focus on a different main theme. The Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as the Messiah, the King of the Jews. The Gospel of Mark paints Jesus as the Suffering Servant. Mark weaves that thread through the entire text. I want to share a story with you today out of the Gospel of Mark, and I want to share a little bit of the backdrop before we get to our main text in Mark, chapter 10. There are these disciples named James and John. They come up to Jesus and they literally say, these are their exact words, they say, "Jesus, we would like for You to do whatever we want." Literally, they said, "We want you to do whatever we ask." And Jesus says, "What would you like Me to do for you?" They said, "Jesus, when You sit in Your place of glory, when You finally become the King that we've been hoping You are going to become, and take power over this entire world, one of us wants to sit at your right and the other wants to sit at your left."

I think about this story and I love that the disciples make such a ridiculous request. I don't know where the saying came from that there is no such thing as a stupid question because I think this is a really stupid question. But I love the audacity the disciples had to come to Jesus and say, "Jesus, do for us whatever we want, whatever we ask." I laugh and chuckle at that, but as I sat with their request, all of a sudden it's not a funny thing. It became something that sounds frighteningly familiar to the way I approach Jesus and the way I think you probably approach Jesus. "Yes, Jesus, Your Kingdom come and Your will be done, but I would really like that promotion." "Jesus, I want to enter into this humility thing and engage in having less, but I would also like a little bit more." "Jesus, what I'd really like is for him or her, who drives me crazy, to leave my life." "And this hard situation that I'm in, I'd really like it to stop." "Jesus, do for me whatever I want."

I also think it's bigger than being a little bit silly or a little bit selfish. You see, these guys, James and John, they were Jesus' disciples. They felt His touch. They experienced His miracles and heard His voice. And they're still not convinced even though Jesus has told them multiple times, three times at this point, that He is going to suffer death on a cross and that they are headed to Jerusalem, not for Him to take this political power as they were thinking and hoping, but so He could lay His life down as a servant. These guys totally don't get it. They totally miss everything, the whole point of what Jesus was trying to explain to them. They are still convinced that Jesus is going to be the King that *they* want Him to be.

One of my favorite commentators, Tom Wright, says this about the story. He says,

James and John want to turn Jesus' messianic journey to Jerusalem into a march to glory—a glory in which they will sit on either side of him when he reigns as king.

John and James have clearly heard all the language about suffering, death and rising again simply as a set of pictures, perhaps meaning 'It's going to be tough, but we're going to come out on top.'

Just like me, I think James and John love to be the shiny toys. They love to be in power and they love status and position, but the message of Jesus is everything *but* that, and they totally miss it. I love Jesus' response. Jesus responds to them so clearly and in such a straightforward way. He looks at them after they make this request about sitting at His right and left and says, "You have absolutely no idea what you are asking." I highly doubt that these two men would have been asking this question if they knew that soon, sitting at Jesus' right and left would mean they would be entering into His crucifixion, as Jesus hung on the cross and died the most horrific, painful death we've ever seen. Tom Wright continues on about the story.

The reason James and John misunderstand Jesus is exactly the same as the reason why many subsequent thinkers, down to our own day, are desperate to find a way of having Jesus without having the cross as well: the cross calls into question all human pride and glory.

The cross of Jesus Christ as a Suffering Servant calls into question all human pride and glory. After this discourse, the story resumes in Mark, chapter 10 with Jesus explaining to them why they don't get it, why they can't sit at His right and His left.

42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus says, "Not so with you. You see all sorts of other kings and rulers. History writes about them. You know what that's been like. They use that power and authority to lord it over people in harsh ways and ways that abuse their power." He says, "Not so with you. Don't be like the rest of the world. Don't feed the system that says the last are the weak. Don't be a part of the problem. Be a part of the solution."

Then Jesus goes on to bring it a little bit deeper. He says, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” What Jesus does, what I’d like to spend a little more time on, is use a form of teaching called parallelism, which was very common throughout the Scriptures. He takes this one idea and reiterates it in the most powerful way to take it to a deeper place, **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”** That word *servant* in the Greek is *diakonos*, which literally means one who executes the commands of another, one who serves food and drink. So this word *diakonos* bears implications of fulfilling an obligation or performing a duty or a service like a waiter does when you go out to a restaurant. You ask for what you want and the waiter brings it to you. That is what this word means. It is this idea of serving other people.

We do a lot of stuff at CPC like that, a lot of really great stuff, like Serving Saturdays and service learning on Wednesday nights with Kids’ and Student Ministries, where we shut the doors of this church and go out to the community. We go into impoverished neighborhoods and we experience new realities that expand our picture of who God is. We volunteer as ushers or Sunday School teachers or small group leaders on Sunday mornings. We give our services to the homeless by going and serving meals. Those are all really good things and that is what Jesus is talking about, but if we want to become great among anybody, we have to first figure out this idea of what it means to be a servant.

All these things are good. The kids listed a million reasons. It is good to make somebody smile. It is good to serve a meal. It is good to make people feel better. Those are good things and they are absolutely a piece of what it means to be a servant of Jesus Christ, but at the same time, if we stop there, which I think most of us do, we miss out on the bigger picture, the greater call of what Jesus invites us to do in becoming servants. If it stops at just serving, if it stops at just making somebody smile or bringing somebody a meal or helping somebody feel better, I think we fall short and are left with an inaccurate and an incomplete definition of what it means to be a servant.

Then Jesus takes it a step farther and goes on to say, **“Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”** He uses a different word there, *doulos*, which is the word for slave in the Greek. To be a slave means to give oneself up to another’s will, to be someone who is devoted to another to the disregard of one’s own interest. That has a very different meaning. All of a sudden, when I am asked to disregard my own interests for somebody else’s, it becomes a little bit harder than just serving a meal. It becomes a little bit different from just making somebody feel better or feeling better about myself. Jesus is literally inviting us to lay down our life so that someone else can be exalted.

When we think about service we think the whole idea is about doing stuff, but Jesus isn’t talking about that. What Jesus is talking about stems from a deeper place that requires a shift and a change in our thought process and actions. A shift and a change where we really believe that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We don’t just intentionally put ourselves last because we hope some day we are going to be first, and we don’t just intentionally serve so that we know we will eventually be served back. We engage with Jesus, embarking on a change that only He is capable of making, a change that only exists inside the Kingdom of God where we don’t have to cling onto our status or power or position or sit at anybody’s right or left.

I was out with some friends at dinner on Friday night and I was struggling with this because I

have a lot of big dreams. I'm a passionate guy and I like big things and I like to run after them really hard. I was wondering, "What does that mean then because it can't mean we can't be ambitious or driven or pursue excellence in our workplace. It can't mean that, so what *does* it mean? I asked my friends and this is the list of what they said it means to put ourselves last. "When we put ourselves last, it means that we don't gain status or position at somebody else's expense." "When we put ourselves last, we actively engage in self-sacrifice so that somebody else can be exalted." "When we put ourselves last, we let go of demanding recognition and praise for our accomplishments and deeds." "When we put ourselves last, we submit to authorities in our lives even when it's hard." "When we put ourselves last, we continue to honor God with our best at work after we didn't get the promotion."

When we engage in a lifestyle that involves these types of things, I think we accept Jesus' invitation to partner with Him and bring God's love to a broken and hurting world. I think that was what service was about for Jesus. I don't think it was about stuff. I don't really think it was at all about what He *did*. For Jesus, I think it was about living out the reality that He knew deep in His core that He was the beloved Son of God the Father. The service we saw Jesus perform and the deeds we saw Him do were an outward manifestation of an inward reality. For Jesus, serving was about restoring dignity to the broken and becoming a servant. It was about bringing God's healing to people who were in pain. Service for Jesus was about showing the immeasurable riches of God's Kingdom to the poor.

I love the last line in this story. Jesus says to His disciples, "**The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.**" Jesus not only died on the cross but He did so as the climax of a well-thought-out vocation. Jesus didn't just serve. It wasn't just something that He did. It was who He was and it was the whole reason that He came. He came to serve. I wonder what it would require and what would need to change in us for us to be able to say that we came to serve, not to be served or cling onto status or extend our best energy and efforts on things that aren't worthy of us. *Serve* is a verb. Jesus said He came to serve. *Servant* is an adjective that describes the character and life of Jesus. Servanthood is the personhood of who Jesus was in His heart for us.

I would love to tell you how we get there but I don't necessarily know. Here's what I do know. Jesus continues to win me over as I actively engage in a lifestyle that I don't fully understand as I submit myself to the idea of letting somebody else be first, of putting myself last so that somebody can be exalted, of letting go of needing recognition and praise for my deeds and accomplishments. As I actively engage in those things, I'm won over to this idea and invitation to become a slave and to live the life of a servant.

So I want you to serve. I want you to serve like crazy in your marriages and at church. Serve strangers, neighbors, your friends, and your families. I want you to serve, but as you do, I want to invite you to take it to a deeper place as we experience the Gospel every day. I'd love you to ask yourself this question about your service. No matter where you are or what you're doing, ask yourself on a daily basis, how do I serve? Where in my life am I intentionally putting myself last so that somebody else can be first? As we serve and ask ourselves that question, my hope is that we wouldn't simply be a church that serves, but that God would change us and transform us into a church full of servants. Pray with me, please.

God, I mean this stuff on one hand and on the other hand, I don't understand this stuff

but I've experienced tastes of your life as I've humbled myself and entered into this lifestyle of becoming a servant. It's what I want for me and what I want for this church. Holy Spirit, we beg for Your presence and Your guidance and Your knowledge and Your wisdom in that process, so that together as broken people we declare, we need You, Jesus. Help us, lead us, guide us. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.