

Service or Serve Us?

sermon digest

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Mark 10:35-45

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One of my early heroes in ministry was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the founding pastor of the Riverside Church in New York. Fosdick established a national reputation as the liberal Baptist preacher of First Presbyterian Church in New York City and public enemy number one of Fundamentalism. As I was beginning my ministry, Fosdick was concluding his. Riverside Church was wealthy by any standard. Initiated by the wealthy Park Avenue Baptist Church, financially underwritten by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and established on Fosdick's controversial preaching and publications, the church abandoned all denominational and sectarian ties. From day one, the pulpit of Riverside Church was both the center of controversy and the center of attraction on Sunday mornings. Fosdick's opinions on current events and his comments in sermons were often the subject of articles in the New York newspapers.

Fosdick was sometimes charged with selling out to the wealthy. In his autobiography *The Living of these Days* Fosdick acknowledged and defended his relationships with John D. Rockefeller, James Colgate, and others persons of great wealth in the Park Avenue Church. On one Sunday morning Mr. Rockefeller happened to arrive after the service was already in progress. The man who had paid for the magnificent building indicated to the usher that, rather than disturb the congregation by going to his usual, prominently positioned pew, he would sit in the balcony. Unaware of Rockefeller's identity, a woman standing in line to be seated heard the conversation and demanded, "Show me a seat downstairs. I am not the balcony type."

Our visions of grandeur reveal misplaced priorities. The seating arrangement in the Kingdom of God seems to hold special fascination in the Gospels. In Luke 14, Jesus took a Sabbath meal in the home of a Pharisee and noticed the way the guests pressed to get the seats of honor. He told three banquet stories and suggested that guests ought to seek the lowest places at the table: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The picture is ludicrous. Jesus had just made his final prediction of the events about to take place in Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over, condemned, mocked, spit on, flogged, killed, and after three days raised. James and John did not hear, or perhaps they were not listening. Or, maybe they were listening, but with filters on their ears, only willing to hear victory and glory.

Some people never seem to get it. Peter had protested vigorously when Jesus had spoken earlier about suffering and a cross. Now James and John were looking right past the pain, right past their friends, to visions of their own grandeur. Matthew tries to place a buffer in place for posterity by locating the request on the lips of their mother. I am not sure whether the resentment was directed toward the ambition of James and John or the timing. Maybe they were guilty not so much of being presumptuous as for cutting to the front of the line. Everyone wants first place. All of us are infected with ambition, but some of us have more gumption and audacity than the others.

In the Gospels they are called "Sons of Zebedee," except for Mark 3:17 where Jesus calls them "Sons of Thunder." They are always popping up at the center of attention. Add Peter, and they are known as the inner-circle of the Twelve. Like Peter, Jesus called James and John out of their fishing boat, away from their father Zebedee to become fishers of men. Peter, James, and John were the only disciples allowed to witness the raising of the daughter of Jairus and the transfiguration of the Christ. They were the lone audience to the message of Jesus about the end time. They were alone with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. But, separate from Peter, the Zebedee boys seem a little flakey. We get a hint of their arrogance in Luke 9; they offered to call down fire from heaven to consume an inhospitable Samaritan town. But their real claim to fame was the conversation with Jesus about the best seats in the house. Matthew attributes the incident to their mother, but Mark puts the words right in the mouths of James and John. They wanted to be seated on the right and left of Jesus in his kingdom.

James and John were doing what every red-blooded American child is taught from the moment they leave the maternity ward: *look out for your own interests*. After all, someone has to occupy the chief seats, pull down the best salary, get the most attention. Why not the Zebedee boys? I suspect that the anger of the others is not about the runaway ambition of James and John. Mostly they were

angry because James and John got there first. The Zebedees (or their mom) had the audacity to ask what everyone else wanted and thought they deserved—the best seats in the house.

With tongue in cheek, Duke Divinity professor Stephen B. Chapman claimed that James and John McZebedee matriculated at his seminary in the fall. He described them as young, white males, who have grown up in the church, attended a Christian college with a major in religion. Their fathers are pastors; they know the way to the top. They patronize second-career ministers, women, and minorities, who do not understand or share their academic and ecclesiastical ambitions. Chapman calls them “Sons of Entitlement” (*Christian Century*, Oct 17, 2006, p. 20). They have a destiny with success that cannot be deterred.

Jesus responded with a patient lesson in values: “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.” Sorry boys, “what’s in it for me” does not fit in this work. The gospel is about service, not serve us.

Visions of grandeur are as common among us as hunger and thirst. Just as we need nourishment for the body to keep us alive and strong, we need to feed the naturally insecure human ego with a sense of importance. When you stare into space, daydreaming about what you would like to be when you grow up or what you might have been if you had had half the chance, what is the focus of your dream? Call it ambition, covetousness, or wishful thinking. Most of us worship our heros and wish for the greener grass on the other side of the fence. May I confess? When my mind wanders off in ambitious venture, I dream about a pastor who causes traffic jams on Sunday morning, whose sermons are press releases, and a church where the best seats in the house are down front. On my worst days—or perhaps they are my best days—I fully understand what James and John were after, and I blush.

If we are willing to pay the slightest bit of attention to the gospel, the church must be a community of service for the least of God’s children. In October, 1995, we spent two weeks in Japan with Keith and Hiromi. Our granddaughter Nina was barely six months old, and we were anxious to meet her. On the way from the airport, Keith stopped for gas. I am not sure whether the fuel was low or our son just wanted us to experience a Japanese service station. After thirteen hours in the air, we were not too excited about sampling the culture; but the fuel stop turned out to be an experience to remember.

Before the car came to a full stop, an attendant began to clean the windshield, while a second began to work on the rear glass. A third received instructions from the driver and began to pump gas, while a fourth motioned for the hood to be released and proceeded to check fluid levels. When the tank was full, the attendant graciously announced the total bill and literally ran the money to the cashier and the change back to the car. Just when I thought that the show was over, two attendants ran into the street to hold traffic in each direction, while a second stood beside the car motioning safe passage back into the traffic. As we drove into the night, the entire crew stood on the driveway waving goodbye. This was standard service for all customers, and it was nothing but good business. In a market where service is the only difference between stations, the competition focused on the experience.

After years of self-service pumps, cleaning my own windows, and waiting in line to pay a cashier, sometimes in the rain, I was reminded of a slight resemblance to a childhood experience. We once called them “service stations.” Perhaps we should have called them “serve us” stations.

The business model of the church puts us in the company of James and John. Church shoppers these days are looking for a place to pull in where someone will clean the windshield and check the oil, or give us a feel-good sermon before carefully attending to our merger with the traffic of the world. George Barna writes about *“Marketing the Church”* and *“User Friendly Churches.”* He prefers business language to describe and evaluate churches. You have to read closely or you will forget that the subject is the church, not the local Walmart or auto dealer. A few years ago, one of the largest churches in the country was featured in the *Wall Street Journal* as a model for today’s business interests. Ushers and parking attendants were schooled by Disney World on the best technique in courtesy and people management. The paid orchestra provided the kind of entertainment to which

people have become accustomed, and the sermon *religiously* avoided all controversy while giving a lesson in positive thinking. The pain of the world was left safely outside.

In kingdom values, service to God is its own reward. When people work only for money, they usually are very poor workers. Workers deserve to be paid, but something else has to motivate and drive our interest. James and John were not demons. They were much like you and me. They wanted a place of *serve us*. They were obsessed with their own station in life. In the end, Jesus introduced them to a new world where service is its own reward and meaning in life focuses not on ME but on the least of God's children.