

Midweek Lent 5: Mercy in Service

Which sport do you think is the most biblical? Some people say that baseball is the most biblical sport, because the Bible begins with the words: **“In the big inning.”**

But I assert that tennis is the truly biblical sport, because the Bible states **that “Joseph served in Pharaoh’s court.”** To be good at tennis, you have to serve well, which is a biblical virtue.

Obviously serving a ball in tennis is a very different thing from serving others in Christian love. But one thing is true: serving is important in both tennis and the Christian life.

Service is crucial in tennis because sets the play into motion. You won’t win in tennis without serving well.

Similarly, service is crucial in the Christian life because it is what God calls us to do. You won’t prevail in Christian discipleship without serving well.

To serve means to work for the benefit of others. It means to assist them and provide for them. Service is the act of caring for someone else and doing what is best for them.

A server in a restaurant delivers food and drink to the patrons.

A public servant carries out responsibilities for the good of the populace (or at least they’re supposed to.)

Those who serve in the military offer their lives to protect a nation from its enemies.

To serve means to give of yourself and your abilities in order to improve the lives of others.

The Bible describes it this way: **“In humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also the interests of others.”**

In our Gospel reading from John 13, Jesus calls his disciples, and us, to serve. And he demonstrated what serving looks like in a very concrete way.

On Maundy Thursday night Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. John’s Gospel described what Jesus did: he **“rose from supper [and] laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”**

This was an astounding act because to wash others' feet was the responsibility of the lowliest servant.

At a special meal usually the lowest-level servant boy would be stationed at the door to wash the feet of guests as they entered the host's home.

But at this meal the Lord himself, the host of the supper, bends down to wash the feet of his disciples!

So it's not surprising that Peter was appalled that his Master would serve in such a lowly manner. But after completing the task of washing their feet, Jesus drives home the lesson. Our text from John 13 records what Jesus said:

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, **“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”**

So, our Lord calls us to serve. Washing others' feet was just an illustration of the broader principle of serving others.

Several other times in his teaching ministry Jesus had called his disciples to a life of service. Today he calls each of us to serve as well.

The problem is, we don't serve well naturally. Our sinful nature inclines us away from serving others. Because of our sinfulness, we would rather serve ourselves, and demand that others serve us.

In fact, this is the very character of sin—to be selfish and self-serving. When a mother asks her son to set the table, his sinful nature inclines him to complain.

When an office worker sees her colleague struggling with an assignment, she fails to assist because of the extra work it would involve her in.

When an elderly neighbor needs assistance getting to the doctor's office, our sinful nature declines getting involved.

All the while, however, we expect others to serve us. A husband expects his wife to do all of the housework in their home. A wife demands that her husband jump at her beck and call.

A coworker takes the easy tasks upon himself and assigns the difficult and demanding ones to others.

All of these cases reflect the reality that, by our own impulses and because of our sinful nature, we would much rather be served than serve.

Yet this is precisely why Jesus came to earth. His mission was to rescue self-serving sinners and remake them into selfless servants. Jesus said of himself: **“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

The very night in which Jesus washed the feet of his disciples he was arrested according to God’s plan.

The very next day Jesus’ own feet were awash in blood as he was nailed to a cross, according to God’s purposes.

It was Christ’s mission to be the Suffering Servant as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. He made the ultimate service by giving his life to ransom self-serving sinners like you and me from our sin.

As the apostle Paul puts it, Jesus **“made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant”** and **“he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

By his sacrificial death, Jesus has ransomed us from sin—literally paid the penalty for our sin!

As you come to him repentant of your sin, your selfishness and self-serving behavior are forgiven.

In his mercy you are pardoned of your neglect to serve others as God has commanded.

Now in view of God’s mercy you are renewed to serve. By Christ’s suffering service on the cross you are ransomed from your sin. By the sanctifying service of the Holy Spirit you are remade into willing servants who live to bless others.

The story is told of an American man who observed the ministry of Mother Teresa. You may recall that in the twentieth century Mother Teresa served the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, caring for the sick and desolate in the city streets.

The man watched as Teresa embraced a leper in the gutter and cleaned his leprous wounds.

The observer, in disgust, declared: **“I *wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.*”** Hearing these words, Mother Teresa looked up at the American and replied: **“*Neither would I. But I would gladly do it for Christ.*”**

Mother Teresa served this leper, and others in desperate need, in view of the mercy of God. She served them for Christ, because Christ had served her by giving his life.

It is for the same reason that we serve others. We serve them because of Christ, and we serve them for Christ.

He is the one who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for us. He is the one who knelt down to wash the disciples' feet and was lifted up on the cross to cleanse us from sin.

He is the one who has told us: **"I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."** (John 13:15-17).

And so, knowing these things, we do them.

In view of God's mercy to us in Jesus, we serve in mercy the needs of those around us.

In view of God's mercy in Christ, we follow the example of Christ the Suffering Servant. Echoing Mother Teresa's words, we do it not for a million dollars, but we gladly do it for Christ.