

The Heart of a Servant

Mark 10:35-45

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Long-term Presbyterian pastor and best-selling author, Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson perhaps best known for his biblical paraphrase called *The Message*, has recently gone into Hospice care. He said this: ***“And yet I decide, every day, to set aside what I can do best and attempt what I do very clumsily - open myself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that failing in love is better than succeeding in pride.”***

That idea is so antithetical to modern society, it’s worth a second read...just to let it seep in, even if only a tiny bit. (reread)

That idea, along with these words: Sacrifice; Humility; Servanthood; Forgiveness; Wisdom; Sanctification (the process of growing spiritually)... are countercultural in our current society. Instead, it’s commonplace: to grab all you can get at any cost—even at the risk of morals and values—and then to boast about it; to put yourself and those like you above others; to plow through life where the means don’t matter as long as the ends are met. In a culture like ours right now, it makes you wonder if the message of the Gospel can get any traction?

In stark contrast, another story emerged from the NYTimes this week:

It’s the story of an ordinary man who did what Eugene Peterson said—he *opened himself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that failing in love was better than succeeding in pride*. His name was Chiune Sugihara. He was an ordinary man in Japan who whose heart guided him to save the lives of tens of thousands of people. Rabbi David Wolpe, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles interviewed Sugihara’s son for the article. I’ve edited it for our purposes here:

Wolpe recounts...*From an early age, Sugihara was unconventional in a society known for prizing conformity. Sugihara’s father insisted that he, a top student, become a doctor. But Sugihara wanted to study languages and travel and immerse himself in literature. Forced to sit for the medical exam, he left the entire answer sheet blank. The same willfulness was on display when he entered the diplomatic corps and, as vice minister of the Foreign Affairs Department for Japan in Manchuria in 1934, resigned in protest of the Japanese treatment of the Chinese.*

In 1939 Sugihara was sent to Lithuania, where he ran the consulate. There he was soon confronted with Jews fleeing from German-occupied Poland.

Three times Sugihara cabled his embassy asking for permission to issue visas to the refugees. The cable from K. Tanaka at the foreign ministry read: "Concerning transit visas requested previously stop advise absolutely not to be issued any traveler not holding firm end visa with guaranteed departure ex japan stop no exceptions stop no further inquires expected stop."

Psychologist Philip Zimbardo writes, "that the very same situations that inflame the hostile imagination in some people, making them villains, can also instill the heroic imagination in other people, prompting them to perform heroic deeds." While the world around him disregarded the plight of the Jews, Sugihara was unable to ignore their desperation.

Sugihara talked about the refusal with his wife, Yukiko, and his children and decided that despite the inevitable damage to his career, he would defy his government.

Wolpe recounted what Sugihara's son said: "He told me his father was "a very simple man. He was kind, loved reading, gardening and most of all children. He never thought what he did was notable or unusual."

Most of the world saw throngs of desperate foreigners. Sugihara saw human beings and he knew he could save them through prosaic but essential action: "A lot of it was handwriting work," he said.

Day and night he wrote visas. He issued as many visas in a day as would normally be issued in a month. His wife, Yukiko, massaged his hands at night, aching from the constant effort. When Japan finally closed down the embassy in September 1940, he took the stationery with him and continued to write visas that had no legal standing but worked because of the seal of the government and his name. At least 6,000 visas were issued for people to travel through Japan to other destinations, and in many cases entire families traveled on a single visa. It has been estimated that over 40,000 people are alive today because of this one man.

With the consulate closed, Sugihara had to leave. He gave the consulate stamp to a refugee to forge more visas, and he literally threw visas out of the train window to refugees on the platform.

Sugihara never spoke about his wartime activities. Even many close to him had no idea that he was a hero.

I think Chiune Sugihara was a perfect example of the kind of follower to which Jesus was referring. Jesus always put people first and didn't hesitate to stand up for people and for justice, even and especially at his own peril. We don't know the faith background of Sugihara. Chances are slim that he was a Christian—and certainly moral heroism is not limited to Christians. Many faith traditions have similar tenets of service, and of love, as some of their core beliefs.

Our scripture passage this morning urges us to be different than what our current culture tells us. Here are a few of the lessons I think we can glean from this morning's passage.

1. There will always be choices to make in life...sacrifice isn't the natural choice.

Even the disciples, who had been with Jesus on a daily basis, and who had heard his teachings on a regularly...even in the days and moments right before this passage, didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. They didn't get it. In the previous chapter, Jesus used children as a metaphor for whom we need to emulate—those who are humble and openhearted, who are not the powerful according to society's standards. The next story after that one tells of the rich man who comes and asks what must he do to inherit eternal life? The man says he's been a good follower of religious law (the 10 commandments) his whole life. When Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor...that was too much for him. Did Jesus really mean everything? We don't know, but surely the mere idea of such sacrifice for this man...of giving up the things/power to which he felt entitled was too much. Right after that story, Jesus reiterates the ultimate meaning of sacrifice in the story right before this morning's lesson---that he would be mocked, tortured and die but would rise again. Still, the disciples didn't get it.

2. If you make the choice to sacrifice, and you do it with humility, expect push back!

People may be afraid to see the choices you and I make when we do something which sacrifices what society would deem as power or prestige. Others might even think that you're making a judgement about **them** by your actions. That happened all the time with the disciples when they looked at what Jesus was doing. They tried to correct him or keep him from acting certain ways. Jesus' response was always rebuke...even telling Peter one time, "Get behind me Satan," which wasn't to be taken literally, but, was a call to him not to interfere with what God was calling him to do and be.

In his book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for Two Halves of Life*, Father Richard Rohr warns, "If you try to assert wisdom before people have themselves walked it, be prepared for much resistance, denial, push-back, and verbal debate." (it's a great book, by the way) The resistance comes from both sides of the relational equation: the giver "asserts," and the recipient does not yet have the awareness to recognize the words as a gift. **We simply cannot know what we do not know.** The difference here, though, is that we have the vantage point, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, that we ultimately know what happens in the story of faith and life. We know that resurrection comes after sacrifice and ultimately death. It's difficult, though, to remember and act on that reality when we face daily choices. We have to be convinced time and time again. Surrender. Bottom out. Die. Repent. Live again...

3. Sacrifice/servanthood leads to great things...freedom from bondage and new life!

There's no way to convince someone of this except to do it. Everything in our culture tells us to accumulate and grab so that we many feel secure. We're told we are entitled to power and status. It's a lie. Jesus told us time and time again, true freedom and security **ONLY** come from

surrender, in death to old ways of being and thinking, in letting go, in giving sacrificially. The more you do it, the more you will build the memory of the benefits.

But let me assure you...sacrifice and relinquishment is always a difficult choice because it's so antithetical to everything we are told in our culture. And no one can MAKE you do this until you're ready...

4. It's difficult to do the right thing on a small or on a grand scale....it's a little easier if you surround yourself with others who are like-minded and supportive and can reinforce you doing the right thing. When you get doubts, or feel weak, and you will, they can encourage you.

The disciples had each other, and of course, Jesus. Sugihara talked about his idea with his wife and children. His wife massaged his hands every night...

In the church, we have each other. We learn and speak a different language which may seem foreign to those outside the world of faith.

How do we talk about this—because we have to in order to maintain sanity and clarity over what and why we do what we do?

Once again, Jesus offers us a searing commentary on human nature...and an instruction/urging the difference to which we as people who follow him are called. Servanthood. The first shall be the slave of all. Our whole identity as people who are baptized is that of servanthood. Of relinquishment. Of welcome. If we are to be true to our identity, we have to talk about it in some way.

Humility does NOT mean backing away from talking about spirituality. It just means that we don't force it on others. Jesus taught us to speak with humility.

Jonathan Merritt, in a NYTimes op-ed this past week entitled, *"It's Getting Harder to Talk About God"*

A recent study out of the Barna Group, a social research firm focused on religion and public life, to conduct a survey of 1,000 American adults revealed that most Americans — more than three-quarters, actually — do not often have spiritual or religious conversations.

More than one-fifth of respondents admit they have not had a spiritual conversation at all in the past year. Six in 10 say they had a spiritual conversation only on rare occasions — either "once or twice" (29 percent) or "several times" (29 percent) in the past year. A paltry 7 percent of Americans say they talk about spiritual matters regularly.

But here's the real shocker: Practicing Christians who attend church regularly aren't faring much better. A mere 13 percent had a spiritual conversation around once a week.

Many people now avoid religious and spiritual language because they don't like the way it has been used, misused and abused by others. But when people stop speaking God because they don't like what these words have come to mean and the way they've been used, those who are causing the problem get to hog the microphone.

I wonder if for some of us, not talking about our spiritual beliefs is more about shame, embarrassment, or some other unresolved feeling.

In many ways I have it easier than you do. I can't get away from my identity. As soon as someone knows I'm clergy, they assume a bunch of things about me, whether true or not...which is a whole other thing. I have to say what I believe so people don't make things up for me, based on their own beliefs.

But for the average person in the pew, how does one talk about his/her beliefs or why you do the things you do on behalf of others? Why give up part of your Saturday on a busy Fall weekend to come and pack food for hungry people around the world? Why spend a Friday night meeting people on the streets of NYC and offering them a cup of soup, a pair of underwear and a conversation? Why give your hard earned money to the ministries of this church? All that when you don't have to? Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. It's simple.

Perhaps we end with the quote with which I began:

"And yet I decide, every day, to set aside what I can do best and attempt what I do very clumsily - open myself to the frustrations and failures of loving, daring to believe that failing in love is better than succeeding in pride." Thank you, Eugene Peterson.

Amen.

BENEDICTION: ~ from Everydayness, Dr. Emilie Townes, address at opening convocation, Yale Divinity School 2005

Ultimately, i believe that somewhere deep inside each of us

we know that perhaps the simplest, yet the most difficult, answer to the challenge of “what will we proceed to do

with the fullness and incompleteness of what we have brought to this time and place” is: live your faith deeply

now i am not talking about perfection—i’m an american baptist

i’m talking about what we call in christian ethics, the everydayness of moral acts

it’s what we do every day that shapes us and says more about us than those grand moments of righteous indignation

and action the everydayness of listening closely when folks talk or don’t talk to hear what they are saying

the everydayness of taking some time, however short or long, to refresh ourselves through prayer or meditation

the everydayness of speaking to folks and actually meaning whatever it is that is coming out of our mouths

the everydayness of being a presence in people’s lives

the everydayness of designing a class session or lecture or reading or writing or thinking

the everydayness of sharing a meal

the everydayness of facing heartache and disappointment

the everydayness of joy and laughter

the everydayness of facing people who expect us to lead them somewhere or at least point them in the right direction and walk with them

the everydayness of blending head and heart

it’s the everydayness of getting up and trying one more time to get our living right

it is in this everydayness that “we the people” are formed

and we, the people of faith, live and must witness to a justice wrapped in a love that will not let us go

and a peace that is simply too ornery to give up on us”