

4th Sunday in Lent – Year A – April 3, 2011 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on Matthew 20:17-28 - written by Pastor Paul Horn

Christ Lives as both Lord and Servant

I. The Lord lived to be a servant for us

II. We will live to servants for him

This morning we continue our Lenten theme *Christus Paradox*, the paradox of Christ; a truth about Jesus that appears to be contradictory. Jesus is King. A King whose kingdom has no boundaries, a king who has all power and authority, a king who is subject to no one, and yet, he subjects himself to all people. How can that be? As we study this portion of Scripture from Matthew we will learn that Christ lives as both Lord and Servant, and because he does, we will live as his servants. We pray: Lord, remove all distractions from our hearts and minds, and open our eyes that we may see wonderful things in your Word. Amen.

I. The Lord lived to be a servant for us

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, for the final time. He and his entourage had probably been traveling along the Jordan River, making their way toward Jericho, about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem. They are very close to the city and Palm Sunday is almost upon them. Jesus, now for the third time predicts his death and resurrection. First time happened after Peter's beautiful confession of faith. Jesus explained to them that he must go to Jerusalem and that he must be killed, and the third day be raised to life. They reacted with shock. Peter even took his Teacher aside and rebuked him, "Never Lord!" The second time took place after his Transfiguration. They reacted with grief. Now, on their way to Jericho, Jesus emphasizes the necessity of their journey to Jerusalem. The reaction by the disciples this time? There was no reaction.

"I'm about to die." "Well, that's nice, Jesus, but we need to make a request of you." James and John (the brothers, sons of Zebedee) accompanied by mom, "We want positions of power in your kingdom." These two brothers either ignored what Jesus had just said about his own torture and cruel death. And were they still thinking about a political Messiah, a physical earthly kingdom that Jesus would be presiding over?

Notice that Jesus doesn't rebuke them, but sets them straight, "You don't know what you're asking for. Let me tell you what you're really asking me. Are you willing to undergo the suffering that I'm about to experience? Because if you're going to be lords and rulers in my kingdom, you need to be willing to endure suffering." They answered positively, "We can! We're able." And serve their Lord and Master they would, but not in the way they had hoped. James was the first disciple to die for his faith. Herod had him beheaded. John would be the last disciple to die, the only one to die naturally of old age, but he still suffered persecution for his faith in Christ.

Meanwhile the other disciples are just burning. Matthew says that they were indignant. In other words, they were jealous they hadn't thought of this idea first. As he always did, Jesus takes this knucklehead moment and turns it into a teaching moment. "Come on guys. Gather around. Listen up." He drew their attention to the Gentile rulers, the Romans. Nothing new for us today. We see it politicians and world leaders jostle for power and look to use that power on the people, not necessarily for the people. You can almost see the

disciples grinning as Jesus says this. They understood how the Roman governors and emperors ruled, full of self-service.

Jesus says, "It will not be like that among you." Notice again that he doesn't rebuke the disciples for wanting to be great in the kingdom of God. He tells them how to be great in the kingdom of God. If you want to be a ruler, then you will be a servant. If you want to be first, then you will be a slave to others. For Jesus to use the word servant was one thing, but to say slave – a slave was a bondservant, he was the property of an owner, someone who worked without expecting any pay; here's your room and board and that's it.

Jesus doesn't just tell them, "Here's what you need to do," he exemplifies it. I'm going to show you how to do this, "The Son of Man did not come down to earth from heaven above to be waited on hand and foot (as he should, he's the King!), but he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." The King of kings sets aside his crown of glory to pick up a crown of shame and humiliation. He becomes a servant, even to death itself. This is what it means to be great in my kingdom. Do you think that circle of disciples got quiet in a hurry?

That's something we struggle with that everyday, isn't it? As baptized children of God, we want to serve God. We want to serve God by serving others. But like the disciples we allow our sinful nature to get his or her hands on our hearts and put a condition on service, "I will serve others but only when, how, where and to whom I determine." We touched on this a little bit last Sunday in Bible class when we looked at the duties of Christian husbands and wives. We put conditions on our love and service to each other. It would be easier to be the kind of husband the apostle Paul says a husband should be (in Ephesians 5) if my wife were the kind of wife she ought to be... and vice versa. It would be easier for me as a child or teenager to listen and respect my mom or dad or my teacher at school if they were the kind of adults God wants them to be. We make it hard to serve others because we feel that they need to respond to our service with equal, if not more, acts of service to us.

Sometimes they make it hard for us to serve them. Isn't it difficult to serve your brother or sister in Christ when that individual continually frustrates you, their behavior doesn't always make sense, you don't agree with the way they manage their life or family, they frequently disappoint you and let you down, they've offended you and pushed you to your limit, they don't seem to appreciate what sacrifices you have made. It makes sense not to have the desire to serve someone like that, but does Christ give any excuses why we shouldn't serve someone? No! In fact, he says, this is how you will serve your husband or wife or children or parents, or your teacher or your neighbor or your brother or sister in Christ, unconditionally.

Christ serves someone like that everyday. It's the person that stares back at me in my mirror every morning. I don't know about you, but when I read this story, a great sense of guilt comes over me, because I know that I am just as guilty if not more so than the disciples. We want to serve, but end up feeling enslaved and imprisoned by our sinful pride, our stubbornness, our selfishness, our unwillingness to serve others. To be honest, God tells us it's what we deserve, to be imprisoned by that guilt, never to be set free, left to die in our guilt and shame.

During WWII, American GIs had heard rumors about concentration camps and how awful the conditions were. The stories were so awful that many of them did not believe it, until they stumbled upon a camp on patrols through the woods of Germany. Then they believed and were very happy to free those people.

This is a picture of you and me. We were enslaved by our own sins of pride and self-service, imprisoned by our sinful nature, held captive by Satan and death. God comes along and sees our pitiful condition, and it gives him great joy to set us free, but not without cost.

Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The ransom price was perfect service. Jesus demonstrated holy servant's attitude, even when others made it difficult for him to do so. Just think about the pride and jealousy of the disciples in this story, and yet he still served them selflessly. Then fast forward to Thursday night, two weeks from now, the upper room. It's time for supper and there's no servant or slave to wash feet. They look at each other, "I'm not going to wash your feet." And Jesus knows they're going to run away in the garden in a few hours and leave him all alone. And yet he, the one who reached down to scoop out the oceans with his hands, stoops down to hold their dirty feet in his hands and wash them with water. And it wasn't a "Fine, if you guys are going to act like a bunch of babies, I'll do it." No. He does it quietly, humbly, with a servant's heart of love. This is the price he paid to set you free.

The ransom not only included his life, but also his death, and everything that went with it; the mocking, the flogging, the taunting, the crucifixion, the wrath of an angry God. Paul explained in our Second Lesson from Romans 8 – "God condemned sin in his flesh." Jesus could be what no other man in the flesh could be; a pure sacrifice for the sins of others, a complete payment for sins. In Jesus God condemned your sins of pride, selfishness, refusal to serve. He condemned them to die in Christ. And so with his death Jesus paid the price God demanded for your release.

Do you know what this means? Through faith in Christ's life and death and resurrection, you have been set free from your prison. You are no longer a slave to your sins. Your sins can no longer condemn you. Satan cannot hold your sins over you to torment you anymore. Paul said in Romans 8:1, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." You are no longer a slave to death. It has no power over you! You will experience victory over your grave. Through faith in Christ... you receive a release from your guilty conscience. In a little while Jesus will give you a taste of that peace by offering you his body and blood with this bread and wine and say to you, "This was the price paid for your forgiveness. You are at peace with God and with yourself."

In Christ you have been set free, and here's where another paradox comes in. You have been set free to serve. Doesn't make sense... but how can we not serve Christ for all he has done for us!? Paul said in our Second Lesson, "You are no longer controlled by the sinful nature (Romans 8)." You have a new self, created to be free from sin, free to serve God; free to be servants.

II. We live to be servants for him

Perhaps you've seen this bumper sticker on around town, "Retired Army and still serving." Isn't that true? Even though there is no Lieutenant Colonel or Master Sergeant barking orders, you still serve. You are still in service of the King who came to serve you with his life, and death and you respond by serving him by serving others.

Your freedom compels you to ask, "How can I serve others?" In fact, that's not even correct. We ask, "How will I serve?" It's not an option. It's what I will do. I will serve. Because I am a servant of Christ. What is the best way I will be a servant? Depends on where you are in life. Husbands, how can you best serve your wife? What is best for her? To lead her to Christ by your example, by sitting down with her in God's Word. Children, what is best for your parents? To love them, respect them, listen and obey. What is best for your brothers and sisters in Christ? To forgive, to be understanding, to be patient, to reach out with prayers and encouragement. What is best for your neighbor or friend who does not know Christ? To look at them through the eyes of Christ; this person's greatest need is to know Christ. I can best serve them by taking Christ to them, so they know that they have a servant Lord, who stooped down to serve them with his life and death and resurrection.

To that end we say, "Lord, make us your faithful servants, as you served us! Amen!"