

Mark 9

³⁰ From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn't want anyone to know it. ³¹ This was because he was teaching his disciples, "The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up."³² But they didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him.

³³ They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about during the journey?" ³⁴ They didn't respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all." ³⁶ Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

When someone says the word, "serve," what images come to mind? Maybe a tennis or volleyball player serving, initiating a volley? Getting served a subpoena, perhaps? Change that to the word "service," and think again. Perhaps a worship service? Or service at a restaurant, whether good or bad? Now change that word again, to "servant," and think about how much the context changes. Servants entire work is to meet the needs of someone else, and quite often, to do the jobs that other people refuse to do. The first servant I think of is Alfred Pennyworth. That's right, Batman's butler. Staunchly loyal. Constantly responding to Bruce Wayne's needs rather than his own. Caring for Batman, always behind the scenes, never seeking the limelight for himself. The eminent servant, living

life for the sake of someone else, and constantly working at things so that Batman, err, I mean Bruce Wayne, wouldn't have to do them.

Think of all the jobs associated with the service industry. Food workers cook and clean so we don't have to. Waste management personnel carry away and dispose of our garbage so we don't have to. Mechanics who change the oil in our cars, electricians who repair our lights, plumbers who unclog our drains, custodians who clean our homes and our churches, and a plethora of other servants who do certain jobs all so we don't have to.

Here in the second week of our series, "Who is Jesus? Who are We?" we see that Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and we are Servants of All. Now, when I talk about Jesus as the Suffering Servant, I'm drawing on an ancient tradition that identifies Jesus with a person foretold by Israel's prophets, a servant who suffers on behalf of the people of

God, so that they won't have to face the same kind of suffering. Here today on the lips of Jeremiah we hear of God's servant who is led like a gentle lamb to suffering and death. Then Jesus' own voice rings out, saying that the Human One, that he, will be delivered into human hands, and will be killed. That suffering is a core part of Jesus' identity as a servant.

But it's why Jesus suffers, the purpose, that makes him a servant. Jesus doesn't suffer for himself. This isn't the kind of suffering you face at the gym, where your own pain brings your own growth. This isn't the kind of suffering that you just grin and bear because the pain of the calculus test is going to be the reward of graduation for yourself. This isn't the, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" kind of suffering, because this suffering leads to Jesus' death, and it's not about making him stronger. It's about giving us life. As a suffering servant, Jesus suffers so that we might not suffer the

consequences of sin, that rather than condemned to death we might rise again to eternal life. Like all other servants, Jesus serves us his suffering of hell so we don't have to suffer hell ourselves.

Yes, you heard me right. What Jesus suffered for us wasn't pain, for we know all too well that cannot avoid pain, nor death. It was the isolation, the abandonment, the loneliness, the permanence of that death. It's the descent to the dead, the entering into hell, that Jesus suffers for us, so that we don't have to ever face that end. Because Jesus faces that fate on our behalf, we never have to come to that eternal loneliness, that endless suffering of separation from God and from one another.

We can't understate the significance of this. Whatever we face as the people of God, whether the pains of life or the grief of death or the joys of success and the thrills of new life, Jesus suffers as our servant so we never have to face

these alone. Jesus lived the harshest consequences of sin, separation from God, a break in the communion of the Trinity, so that we'd never have to face that breach. The promise of Jesus in the resurrection - and yes, he rises as a servant as well - is that nothing can separate from the love of God.

Further, that means nothing need separate us from one another either. Jesus spanned the largest gap in the cosmos, between heaven and hell, between communion with God and total isolation, and so none of the smaller divisions need remain. Family feuds may erode, for even the Hatfields and McCoys may find peace in the servant hood of Jesus. Criminals and authorities need no longer be at odds, for even the James Gang and the Pinkertons may find peace in the servanthood of Jesus. We're not meant for division, and more so, we're not meant for loneliness. Because Jesus faced that isolation for us, we don't have to.

I think this is an especially potent word for those of us that suffer from depression or other mental disorders within our culture. So often when people face these ailments, a deep cycle of isolation ensues because the feeling sets in that no one can possibly understand how OCD or anxiety disorders feel. Rather than face the disappointment of being misunderstood, too often this leads to further isolation, where the closest acquaintance one has is the disease that causes the struggle in the first place. It is, indeed, a vicious cycle.

Now, before I'm accused of speaking out of turn, you should know something about me. In 2008, I was diagnosed with Clinical Depression. In 2010, that diagnosis was extended to include Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and General Anxiety Disorder. There's nothing quite like a chemical imbalance in your body preventing you from believing not just that you're unloved, but you're loveable.

There's nothing quite like your own mind revolting against you and forcing you to return again and again to locked doors, doors you know you sealed yourself, rechecking them more than a dozen times before you can continue your day. Who could understand those feelings? Even those who suffer from the same struggles face them in different ways. If you've seen my office, you can clearly see I'm not one whose OCD demands a clean and organized workspace. I literally can't understand how OCD works out in the lives of others, even though we have the same disorder.

And yet, and yet, because Jesus suffered the absolute loneliness of hell, because Jesus lived life fully apart, that means we are not doomed to a life of loneliness, not even to the cells of our own minds. This doesn't mean that everyone or anyone will understand the complexity of our disorders, just as we don't understand the fullness of Jesus'

suffering as he descended to the dead. What it does mean is that we're not condemned to walk those halls alone, that out of our isolation we may have relationship, that we're loved despite our struggle to love ourselves. That relationship begins with Jesus, who knows all too well the suffering of loneliness and separation, and so walks with us in the deepest and darkest places, even if they're of our own making. Then, in the resurrection into life, that suffering servant refuses to leave us behind, but instead pulls us back into the land of the living, and into relationships with people who loves us even if they don't understand us, who embrace us even if they don't comprehend us.

The point is, as Jesus collapses the walls between us and brings us all into life, we're called to become servants too. That's the beauty of the church. We're called to become a people who lives for someone else. We're called to become a people that works on behalf of others, so

others might not suffer needless pain, needless death, needless isolation. If we bear the image of God, the likeness of the suffering servant, then we must be willing to serve others, and yes, to suffer on behalf of others.

There's nothing easy about this call to suffer, and surely nothing glamorous about this kind of service we're called to live. But it's powerful. It's life changing, both for ourselves and for the world.

Just after Michelle and I were engaged, she had to have reconstructive back surgery. For over eight hours she was on a metal table while doctors cracked and reconstructed her spine around two chromium cobalt rods and with fourteen titanium screws. Her parents suffered for her in a number of ways throughout this process. Despite good insurance, it was a significant financial hurdle. There were weeks of care she needed that, while I helped some, they carried the overwhelming majority. But one of the

images I'll never forget is, in the first few days as we all lived in the hospital after the surgery, Michelle's dad refused to sleep throughout the night. He stayed vigilant throughout from dusk until dawn, suffering sleeplessness, so there'd always be someone there to offer an immediate response to any needs she faced. Sometimes he'd read. Other times, as I'd come to check in the room, he'd be covering his mouth to muffle laughter as he watched every season of Arrested Development available at the time. In that suffering, in that servitude, he shouldered some level of care that I didn't have to bear, some level of worry that Michelle didn't have to bear, some level of attentiveness that the night staff didn't have to bear.

And you know what he didn't do? Complain. Ever. He knew that it was part of his calling to serve in this way. So, as he served Michelle, and the rest of the family, Russ found joy and purpose in that life of service. Like Alfred the Butler, his

identity became tied to the excellent service he offered to someone he loved. Like Jesus, his service was meant to bring new and abundant life to someone else. That's the kind of life we're called to lead.

Now, it's one thing to live this way for someone that you know, someone that you love. But we're called to live this way not just for our friends, not just for the people we like, not just for the people with think deserve it, but for all. Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and through that, we become servants of **all**. That's the wonderful and difficult part of this calling. Just like the Good Samaritan, our life of service can't stop with the people we're prejudiced against, whether because of money or race or sexuality or politics. As we're called to become servants, we're called to serve not just those who we think deserve our attentiveness or have earned our compassion, but to serve all. We're called not just to serve when it's easy for us or when it makes sense in

our eyes, but to serve all. What does this mean? It means that, for the Hatfields and the McCoys, we as the church should be a movement of reconciliation. It means that, for Pinkertons and the James Gang, we're called to be a movement for compassion and restoration. It means that, we're called to step in to the darkness alongside people whose depression or anxiety makes them feel unloveable, whose disorder causes them to push us away, and remind everyone that they're loved, that they're not alone, that even though they face an uphill battle we can't fully understand, they never have to face the hell of isolation.

Wherever the hells of division and isolation exist in this world, we're called to become servants of the Suffering Servant, carrying Christ's peace and community into even the most desperate of places. Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and we're called to become servants of all. Where do you see that need for service? For community? For peace? For a

word of hope and love? That's where you're called to be a servant. Amen.