

**Promises to Keep (I): To Serve**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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**Text: Mark 10:35-45**

A minister was concerned about her church's annual stewardship campaign and the congregation's resistance to give more. She talked with the organist about following her sermon with something especially inspirational that would stir souls and checkbooks. On stewardship Sunday, her eloquent sermon ended with a clear call to action: *Now all who will increase their pledge stand up!* And the organist let loose with The Star- Spangled Banner.

Well. When it comes to giving, it seems the Church will stop at nothing to encourage, exhort, invite, and plead with its members to do so generously (maybe that's because when it comes to giving, some people will stop at nothing.....period.).

The idea behind our campaign theme this year is to give, in remembrance of divine and human promises: God's promise to be our God, and our promise to be God's people. We promise to keep faith with those who came before us and those who will come after us. We promise to care for each other in this family of faith and beyond, to promote human flourishing in our city and region and world. Our promises are great because this is a great church, an important institution in metropolitan Cleveland and a vibrant faith community in the Heights.

The morning gospel reading links greatness with giving. Jesus pulls the rug out from under the disciples' self-serving request to reveal the true contours of a life in full. But it's not what disciples then or now expect: it flies in the face of conventional notions of security and success to paint a portrait of a servant. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter at the 35<sup>th</sup> verse.

[MARK 10:35-45]

I haven't thought about servanthood in quite the same way since reading Kathryn Stockett's best-selling novel "The Help." She tells the story of three unforgettable women in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962: a young white woman of privilege, who dreams of becoming a writer, and two black women who work as maids in the homes of white citizens. These two women put their livelihoods and lives at risk in order to tell—and get other maids to tell-- what it's like to be a servant, to wait on families in the racially and socially-segregated South. Their stories speak of affection for the white children

they raise, the pride they take in particular skills like cooking or sewing, but also of dreams deferred, and the indignities of being treated as “inferiors.” *Miss Margaret always made me put my hair up in a rag, say she know coloreds don’t wash their hair. Counted ever’ piece a silver after I done the polishing. . . .When Miss Margaret die, her husband hug me, give me a letter from Miss Margaret, reading “Thank you. For taking care of my baby. I never forgot it.” [The maid, Callie] continued: If any white lady reads my story, that’s what I want them to know. Saying thank you, when you really mean it, when you remember what someone done for you: it’s so good.” [p. 260]*

Any discussion about servanthood as a model for the Christian life must consider the ways that role has been forced upon others, denying their full humanity. In the text Jesus specifically repudiates a stratified society, in which the powerful rule over the subservient. The servant leader Jesus is talking about is neither tyrant nor slave, but one who freely chooses a path of service on behalf of others, and for a higher purpose than self-interest.

Interestingly, Jesus’ description is prompted by the request of two disciples who have recognized their Teacher’s greatness, and who want some of the reflected glory for themselves.

“Teacher,” they plead, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” If that sounds a bit arrogant to our ears, well, remember that James and John had made significant sacrifices to follow Jesus—giving up their fishing careers, leaving home and family, risking hostile encounters with religious leaders. They had bet the boat on this Teacher who offered such a different perspective on life and faith than anyone they’d ever heard. Maybe they felt they deserved some recognition, some credit, some reward.

I wonder, too, whether their request was born of their uncertainty about the future. Just a couple of verses before our text, Jesus had predicted for a third time that he was going to be condemned to death and executed. The gospel writer even noted that those who followed him were afraid, and frankly, who can blame them? If it’s true that a rising tide floats all boats, then a sinking ship indicts all hands on deck. So maybe they simply wanted to get out of this incredibly risky journey alive, safe and secure at the side of their Teacher.

You get the feeling that the indignation of the other disciples wasn’t so much the selfishness of the request, but that their two colleagues had beaten them to the draw. Hadn’t each one done his share, made valuable contributions to this ministry? And now, just because they’d asked first, were James and John going to get special treatment?

Jesus gathers them all together, in this teachable moment. Look, you know how it goes in the world. The golden rule: those who have the gold, rule. Survival of the fittest. If you're part of a sled dog team, the scenery never changes unless you're the lead dog. But that's not the way it shall be in God's Kingdom; that's not the way it's supposed to be among you: *whoever wishes to become great must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all.* True greatness is demonstrated in the growing ability to serve; to reach beyond narrow self-interest on behalf of others; to counter fear for one's life with trust to give it away.

Certainly Jesus' call to service is for each of us, individually. But this morning I invite us to hear these words as an invitation to grow as a servant church, a faith community dedicated not to our own glory, but to the glory of God, demonstrated in justice-seeking, compassion-giving, neighbor-loving service here and out there. [at 8:30: the photos you are watching are examples of some of the ways Fairmount serves.] [at 11: Picture in your mind's eye some of the ways Fairmount serves right now] We extend hospitality to homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network and New Life Community, and we advocate for systemic changes through the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope. This congregation has built four homes with Habitat for Humanity, and worked on many others. We serve meals to hungry people at Bethany and North Presbyterian Churches; we raise money to combat hunger through the annual Hunger Walk; we write letters to support legislation that helps reduce poverty. This congregation founded Heights Youth Club, which now provides learning and enrichment opportunities for over one hundred Heights young people after every school day. We share leadership in E Prep School and the Intergenerational School, two examples of outstanding education models proven to close the achievement gap between suburban and urban areas.

We attempt to "make a difference in the world" by selling fair trade coffee and other products and by participating in Jubilee efforts to cancel the debts of the world's poorest nations. We offer mission trips and hands-on mission projects for youth to learn and cultivate a life-long practice of servanthood. As much as this is, and as good as it is, we have not reached our capacity. We can do more....and more of us can do it.

Servant leadership is not exercised simply on special projects or volunteer activities. It is a way of life. All of us can apply this spiritual principle in the work we do every day. It's a matter of reorienting our perspective away from self, toward others. It's a way of life that seeks to emulate the servant leader Jesus.

I believe Jesus' description of the servant calls us to rethink a couple of attitudes. One is our constant need to compare ourselves with others—and come out ahead. If we view others mainly as competitors to beat, it's hard to imagine acting on their behalf, or working to improve their circumstances. I'm not talking about false humility or self-loathing; we are not called to disappear. Rather I think Jesus means applying our gifts and talents and commitments in the service of others, instead of continually leveraging them for enhancement of our own status and value. Our growth strategy focuses on enlarging our capacity as servant-leaders—ministering to one another *and* addressing the needs of our community. We envision this congregation as a church in which every member can identify at least one ministry that has captured their imagination and commitment. Some of those ministries are carried out right here, and we are so grateful for servant leaders who deliver flowers to hospitalized folks, teach church school, lend professional expertise to the financial management of our church, tend the grounds around our property, prepare meals and food for fellowship events, lead or participate in our music program....acts of service that embody the example of Jesus. I would love to talk with anyone who wants to connect their life to a higher purpose, to make a difference.

Now that I am healthy, a few of you have ventured to ask me what I learned from this past year of illness and treatment. As you might expect, part of it lies in the experience of facing mortality, and remembering to savor the gift of each day. But even more than that is new insight on what makes life secure. Come to find out it's not about being in control, because we're not. I am learning that the best servant leaders are the ones who understand that they too need to be served. We are not the ones with everything to give; as if service is simply one more way to exert power while maintaining a posture of superiority. No! Every one of us has gifts to share toward meeting our common need: to be loved, to have significance, to live a good life. As we touch others, we will find our own lives touched and changed.

Are you able? Jesus asked his eager disciples. And then went on to help them understand what it meant to say "yes" to this amazing enterprise. Surprisingly, it is a life that involves some dying: dying to self-centeredness and self-absorption; dying to the kind of pride that limps along in self-sufficiency; dying to the fearful calculation that insists on balancing the give and take, that keeps count. But it is also a life that really is life—brimming with grace and gratitude, connected to a family as wide as earth's bounds, and as close as the person with whom you share a pew, committed to a cause greater than anything we can imagine by ourselves.

Are you able? Jesus still asks disciples. Are we able, Fairmount Presbyterian Church? May God give us strength to stand with Jesus, to give as we have received,

to serve as we have been served,  
to love, because God first loved us.

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Instead of a creed or affirmation of faith, I invite us to pray together the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, one which expresses the profound blessing of a life of service.