

## Isaiah 53:4-12

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup>But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

<sup>6</sup>All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup>He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup>By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. <sup>9</sup>They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

<sup>10</sup>Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. <sup>11</sup>Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

## Mark 10:35-45

### The Request of James and John

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ <sup>39</sup>They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’

### How Can We Serve Everyone?

1. When I first moved to New York I met a pastor named Bruce Rudolph out in Long Island who shared with me what he saw as the difference between heaven and hell. Everything looks identical in heaven and hell; there is a great banquet hall where everyone comes to a huge table filled with all sorts of delicious things – it’s better than a Methodist potluck dinner. Everyone arrives at this great table, but they discover that their elbows don’t work, so they can hold their fork or spoon or knife, but they cannot get food into their own mouths. In hell people spend their time in frustration trying to feed themselves; in heaven people feed one another.
2. I know nothing about the afterlife (haven’t been there), but I believe we choose to live in heaven or hell right here in this life. I think that you can take two people, and present them with the same surroundings – the same people and the same objects, the same climate and the same community – and one will find peace while the other finds conflict, one will find joy while the other finds sorrow, one welcomes strangers while the other arms himself. One grows in love and the other lives in fear. And the core difference between these two individuals is a matter of service: do they serve themselves or do they serve others? Are they trying to feed themselves or are they feeding and being fed by the people around them? Or, to make a different comparison, if they were on a sinking ship would they be helping others onto the lifeboats or would they be scrambling to find a seat for themselves?
3. Well none of us are all one way or the other; if we really were on a sinking ship, there would be a lot of people we might help, but we might be keeping track in the back of our minds just how many lifeboats are left, and when it got to the last boat, to the last seat, we might look into the eyes of that last person and ask ourselves, “Does he *deserve* to be on the boat more than I do?” If we were at the heavenly banquet, there would be some people we would have no problem feeding, but others we’d have a problem with. If the person next to you happened to be a drug lord or a terrorist or a maniacal dictator we might not want to feed him. If the person was trying to get on the lifeboat we might just jump in the boat and shove off, and there may be plenty of people on the lifeboat who would applaud if you did so. In a world where there is so much injustice and corruption and senseless violence, it’s easy to find villains whose lives seem less worthy than your own, and you will find plenty of people who will justify your decision to save your own skin rather than someone else’s. I believe that it’s the case with all of us that there are people we have no problem serving, but there are others that we absolutely refuse to serve.
4. So what are we to make of Jesus’ words: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave to *all*”? ‘*All*’ is a big word for one with only three letters! How am I to serve someone who is abusive or corrupt or murderous? How do I serve someone who’s selfish and unkind? Wouldn’t serving someone like that actually take away from my service to more deserving folks? I mean, is it really possible to serve ALL people?
5. Well, Jesus *did* serve all people by dying on the cross; our reading from Isaiah says, “All like sheep have gone astray,” and the person Isaiah describes, who we Christians believe

to be Jesus, took on the transgressions of ALL people. And that's important in itself because it reminds us that WE are among the ALL who Jesus died for. While we are so apt to pick and choose who deserves our services, our kindness, our help, none of us are perfect, and Jesus, who *was* perfect, gave up his life for ALL of us imperfect creatures. So it's really rather absurd for us to pick and choose who we serve based upon our assessment of their worth; from God's perspective *none of us* are worthy of being saved. Yet Jesus dies for us, for *all* of us. Does it make any sense for us to distinguish between ourselves who *deserves* to be served and who doesn't?

6. The question, I believe, is not about *who* we should serve (as Jesus tells us we should serve everyone). The question is not *who* we should serve but rather *how* we should serve, and to gain some clarity on how we should serve others we can look to the Bible to the stories of Jesus. Remember that Jesus lived in this very real world that was really no different from the world we live in, complete with villains and heroes, the good and the bad, the strong and the weak, the sick and the healthy, the righteous and the bigoted. And Jesus had enemies; the story we read today finds him on the road to Jerusalem where scribes and elders and priests and Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians will conspire to kill him – there are plenty of villains to go around. Did he ignore them and refuse to serve his enemies? Not really. It's true that Jesus spent most of his time with the poorest, the weakest, the sickest, the most vulnerable people in the world; such people flocked to him – once his reputation as a healer was established people crowded in around him. But Jesus didn't restrict his ministry to the poor; when the rich came to him and pleaded for him to help them, Jesus did not refuse them; he healed the servant of a Roman Centurion and resurrected the daughter of leader of a synagogue, and neither of these gentlemen were poor or destitute. He didn't discriminate between rich and poor.
7. But what about his enemies? I don't think Jesus looked upon anyone as his enemy, but others looked upon Jesus as *their* enemy. So how did Jesus serve them? He served them by confronting them! When certain scribes said that he was working under the authority of the devil, Jesus told them to be very careful what they say lest they commit an unforgivable sin. When others came to test Jesus, to try to get him in trouble with the Romans or the rulers, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. Jesus declared truth in the face of lies. It may seem like Jesus was picking fights, it was others trying to pick fights with him. Jesus never raised a sword against those who opposed him. To speak truth to power is doing a service to those in power, to let them know that their actions are misguided, that their power is illusory, and that their "kingdom" is bound to fall. Jesus served his enemies a nice hot cup of truth, but too often they refused to drink from it the way a child refuses to take some medicine. In order to save face and keep power, Jesus enemies would not admit that they were wrong and that Jesus was right, and so they killed him instead of listening to him, *but at no time did Jesus stop serving them.*
8. God loves everyone, and Jesus loved everyone, even those who plotted to kill him; Jesus shared his cup with Judas on the night that Judas went out and betrayed him. And because he loves us all, Jesus served us all. And so the issue is not about *who* we serve – that is everybody. The issue is rather *how* we serve. To the poor and the oppressed we serve them justice and resources; to the proud and the oppressive we serve them truth and

we invite them to join the right team rather than compete with us, to come into the light of God's Kingdom rather than dwell in the darkness of their own kingdom. I feel compassion for the unrepentant sinner, the one who is so proud that he justifies injustice, because I believe that such a person is ultimately quite lonely and sad. I think of a man like Joseph Stalin who consolidated his power by killing anyone he suspected of challenging him. Did such a man have any true friends, anyone who could speak honestly to him, or was everyone around him just afraid of him? True Stalin is guilty of murdering countless people, and for that he must answer to God, but can we say that God loved Stalin any less than you or me? Didn't Jesus offer his life for Joseph Stalin as well?

9. Our tendency is to pick and choose who we love and who we hate, and thus who we serve and who we don't, but Jesus calls us to love all and to serve all. When we can love all we have a clearer idea of how to serve all. Brothers and sisters, let us not fall into the temptation of withholding our service to others because we think ourselves better than others. We are all God's children, and we are all children of grace. None of us deserve to be fed at that great banquet. None of us deserves a seat in God's lifeboat, yet Jesus puts us all onboard before he himself goes down with the ship. We might not like who we're sitting next to, but Jesus has chosen to serve that person just as he has chosen to serve us, to die for us, that we all may have life eternal. Let us remember that we are all children of grace and serve one another without qualifying. Amen.