

Last Sunday, I gave you homework. You were asked to look around you to see who needed a long, loving look from the divine, that you could extend to them. I'm not going to ask who did it. But, I think it's a great place to pick up from today, because extending someone your time, attention, and love is way to serve. It is an offering that you give them.

Someone asked me once, why do we take up an offering in Worship. Why does the church pass the plate? Giving our tangible gifts to God is a way to worship. We give back to God a portion of what God gives to us. An offering is more than just giving our money. The definition of "offering" is "a thing offered." We can also give our time and talents as an act of worship and a form of discipleship. We can offer our life in the form of a prayer, and place it into the plate when it comes by.

We are also giving an offering by the way we live out our faith through service. We offer ourselves to God when we serve others. As many of you know, I'm still in the ordination process, and one of the favorite exam questions from the Board of Ordained Ministry is, what does servant leadership mean to you? As a clergy person, I am called to be a servant leader. Yes, I am called to lead this church, but, most importantly, I am called to serve this church, the people of this church, and this community. The servant leader knows that his or her place is not on either side of Jesus in a place of honor, but in the trenches, washing dirty, stinky feet.

I am appointed here as Christ's representative, yet I'm appointed here to serve. Do you see the difference in attitude? Jesus makes it clear in this passage that we are not called to sit on top of the heap, enjoying the benefits found there. We are called to serve from the lowest position.

James and John needed an attitude adjustment. They didn't ask Jesus if they could sit on the right and left of him in his kingdom. They were very manipulative. They said, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (v. 35). That's not a question. They aren't asking. They are feeling him out to see what he would say before they actually make their request. I can hear the sarcasm in Jesus' voice: "What is it you want me to do for you?" (v.36). Now, the irony here is that just four verses before this passage, Jesus tells his disciples for the third time that he is about to be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed, yet he will rise on the third day. Then, immediately following, James and John say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (v.35). I'm sure Jesus was thinking, "Dying for you not enough?"

But, he didn't say that. He was very patient with them. He said, "You do not know what you are asking" (v.38). Isn't that the truth? So many times, we ask for things and pray for things for self-gain, yet we don't really know what we're asking, especially if it isn't God's will. Jesus tells James and John that it is not his place to grant what they are asking. Those places of honor are prepared for someone else. The real place of honor for a disciple is in service.

Just as Jesus said that he came to serve, not to be served (v.45), we too gain honor by offering our lives in service. When we are in service for something higher than our self-gain, our true self emerges, and the kingdom of God unfolds. James and John thought the kingdom of God was a tangible kingdom because they lived in a kingdom system. They didn't quite get yet that the kingdom of God is in our hearts and minds, and it unfolds as we love and serve each other.

Elie Wiesel understood this. He was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “the most important Jew in America.” He passed away in 2016, but he lived quite a life. He was an Auschwitz survivor, a writer of more than fifty books, a professor at Boston University, and was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the French Legion of Honor’s Grand Cross, an honorary knighthood of the British Empire and, in 1986, the Nobel Peace Prize, for all his work in human rights. Yet, in his book, *Open Heart*, he looks back on his life during a health scare, and none of these honors are mentioned.

Some call this book a memoir, and I find it telling that it is only 77 pages. It’s not about him. It’s about his family and how he served, fighting for human rights, to make the world a less-evil, more-compassionate place. As he faces his own mortality, he wonders if he has lived his life well and if he has done enough. He came to this conclusion: “If life – mine or that of my fellow man – is not an offering to the *other*, what are we doing on this earth?”¹

We are here to serve, not to be served. We are called to be servant leaders, to offer ourselves in service to others, to bring about the kingdom of God. How are you serving? Is your life an offering?

Gracious God, we confess that too often we are clueless. Like James and John, we pray selfish prayers, for power, for position, for prestige, and for what? So that people will say how great we are? Teach us that true greatness comes from humble service. Show us how to roll up our sleeves, dig in, and lend a hand – even when no one else will. Help us to have an

attitude adjustment when we slip and forget our call to serve. Give us the grace to live as humble servants, to give our lives as an offering to you and to others. Amen.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart*, 74.