**Sermon Title: SERVE IMPACTFULLY:** Being a Servant Leader Like Jesus

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:35-40

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When I first started work in ministry, everyone was focused on being a “servant leader.” You may have heard of this type of leadership before but as it was described then, it was rooted in the idea that the “top” leader should always be serving others. I remember people telling me that it meant that even though I might be the senior leader in my organization I still needed people to know I would take out the trash. There were even books that I read that encouraged me to park the furthest from the building or find ways to make sure that everyone saw that I was really willing to “get in there” when things got tough. Truthfully, this is not bad advice for a leader, yet something about it always felt a little “off” to me. It perhaps felt performative for business leaders or those who may not know the story of Christ and his ministry, to me – because when I think of what it really means to be a servant leader I think of Jesus.

Jesus’ ministry was steeped in servanthood. We all know the key stories that teach us as so. We remember when Jesus began his ministry – turning water into wine in an act of serving his mother when she asked him to perform his first miracle. Our hearts soared with Jesus when we read how he would heal those around him, and we rejoiced as he served those in need. We were and are left astounded when the son of God knelt before his disciples and friends and gently washed their dusty, dirty feet before breaking bread together. Jesus, at his core, was a servant first, and he invites us into a life of service.

Our scripture passage today, from Matthew 25:35-40 is a recognizable one.

*“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,****36****I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’****37****Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink?****38****And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?****39****And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’****40****And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”*

This passage is a call to and a depiction of what it means to be a follower of Christ. It’s Jesus, telling those around him that there will be a judgement of how we live our lives here on Earth, and that judgement will be defined by how we serve others.

Often less noticed here though is a phrase that I always like to zone in on; it states, “Then the righteous will answer.” The “righteous” ones, are those who have been deemed correct in their servanthood. It usually reminds me of another phrase, which is “God’s Righteousness.” I’ve always been a firm believer that God’s righteousness is the definition of what justice looks like in the world. The only way we get true justice is to seek out righteousness, and the only way we get to be righteous, then, is to serve others.

As Deacons, we are called to servanthood as an order; I think this sometimes makes people believe that we are the only ones who are meant to serve. But this is simply not the case. Deacons are called to serve, yes, but we are also called to remind each of us that servanthood is and was a key ministry of Christ, and to help each other serve the same way that Jesus served.

In some ways though, I often feel it’s a little unfair when I preach on this passage because of the work that I get to do every day. You see, in my ministry context, I actively work and serve those who are experiencing homelessness and poverty. My day-to-day includes coordinating events and activities that explicitly fulfill the mission of Matthew 25. We provide clothing and food assistance. We go out to find and reach out to those who many find to be strangers and build relationships with them. We provide identification services and connection to resources to those who have been in prison. And ultimately our goal is to make sure that everyone we work with has a safe place to call home. So, when I talk about Matthew 25, I know and can see what it looks like to live it out very tangibly, and I realize that’s not everyone’s reality. In fact, it might be pretty hard to read this passage and figure out how to implement it if you work in a different field, or are retired, or are a stay-at home parent.

But, as followers of Jesus, we are called to serve in what we call the upside-down kingdom. Jesus' kingdom is often described as "upside-down" because it challenges the world's values of power, wealth, and status. In His kingdom, the last are first, and the first are last. Serving in this kingdom means seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

Part of that upside-downness is searching out how we carry out the mission of Christ in a world that looks very different than the one in which Jesus served. It’s discovering that there might be more to servanthood than simply caring for those that Jesus listed in this passage. I think the key might be found in that phrasing there at the end of the passage, Jesus says, “whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.” And the question we should ponder here is who, indeed, are the least?

Let’s lean in a little bit here on this wording. I think we must be very careful on who we label and why we do so. I don’t think Jesus’ intention in saying, “the least of these,” meant that those we are serving are “less than.” I do fear that sometimes that impression is taken here, but the reality is, we are all *in some place in our live*s “the least of these.” We are all in some place ‘the least of these’ because we are all people who have needed to be served.

When I teach poverty alleviation workshops, I always use this quote from Henry Nouwen, “The great illusion of leadership is to think that [a person] can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.” You see, it can be easy to think that when we are serving others that we might think that we are more “blessed,” but true servant leadership isn’t really about taking out the trash while everyone is looking, it’s realizing that you and the person you are serving are the same. It’s, as Nouwen says, that you can lead others out of the hard places, because you, yourself, have been in a hard place.

One of the things I’m most proud of is that as an Annual Conference a few years ago we passed a resolution that said that we would embrace trauma-informed care in our work. Trauma-informed care is a thought-out process of responding to others in a way that not only acknowledges another’s trauma but recognizes it as a possible driving force in that person’s life. We easily define this by saying, “It’s not what’s wrong with you, it’s what happened to you.” Shifting our focus away from judgement and into a place of curiosity - distinguishing behavior from identity. When we take this approach, we are also acknowledging that we, ourselves, have experienced trauma in our own lives in some capacity, because the human experience is one that includes trauma. When we can start to think about our own trauma and serve others with the idea that they are also people who’ve experienced trauma, it puts us on a more equal setting. Instead of one of us being the servant, and the other being the one that is to be served, we both just become humans – beloved by God – and that’s how we learn who the real least of these are.

When we can learn that we are all the least of these, it makes it a lot easier to live out Matthew 25 because the least of these are everywhere. You do not have to work in a ministry for those who are experiencing homelessness to do the work of Christ in the world. In fact, you can do it literally anywhere you go – because when you lean into seeing everyone as someone to serve – then you can serve everywhere.

And serving everywhere is an important thing to remember when we know that God is working everywhere too. You see the best thing about being a servant leader is that we don’t have to do something extravagant to do this Kingdom work because God is already AT work. You simply have to look for where God is and join in the mission. By staying attuned to the Holy Spirit, we are given eyes to see where God is moving and how we can participate in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. This participation might look different for each of us, but it always involves extending God's love and grace to others.

And it’s literally everywhere. You can start by looking at our United Methodist roots. As Wesleyans, what we call social holiness, has always been a key part of our identity. Methodists have started children’s homes and hospitals, they have fought against unfair immigration practices, and have worked to cure malaria. The United Methodists are a people who know what it means to serve like Jesus, and opportunities to join them abound. It’s not just what we are already doing, though – but what we can do more of.

There is so much brokenness in this word. Oppression of People of Color, women, people of other faiths, and our LGBTQ neighbors continues to run rampant in the United States. And anytime oppression is happening, to any persons, this is where the righteous are called to act. Which also means that this path of following Jesus will not be easy or swift.

Remember that upside-down kingdom we talked about earlier? I can tell you that in that Kingdom no one is looked down upon, and diversity is celebrated. If we truly believe that everyone is a beloved child of God then we cannot sit back and let our neighbors and siblings be harmed by oppressive practices.

Being a servant leader, then, is also standing up for what is right. Sometimes, it’s saying the hard things – even if costs you something. Because, at the end of the day, that’s the model we learned from Jesus. Jesus living a life of ultimate servanthood cost him his life – the willingness to sacrifice everything for everyone – and so if we are to follow the path of Jesus, we must also be willing to sacrifice. There is more to living a righteous life than parking in the furthest parking spot. It’s doing the hard things when we really want to look the other way.

Because that’s what’s really happening in this scripture. Jesus is calling out all of the hard things. Because people wanted to look the other way when someone was naked, or hungry, or, as we remember from the story of the Good Samaritan, lying in a ditch about to die. Caring for “those people” would cost something. Jesus is saying – but when you did it, when you cared for these, you did it to me.

And that’s the final point of being a servant leader. Jesus gave us the golden rule, “do unto others as you have done to you,” in the Sermon on the Mount. A revolutionary passage of scripture where Jesus lays out all the ways the Kingdom can and will be turned upside down. Then, later on in Matthew 25, he tells us – when you care for these, you do it to me. When we put all we’ve learned together today what we really are saying is, when we care for others, we care for ourselves, and we care for Jesus. A servant leader looks around at the world they are living in and realizes that it’s all connected. If every single professing Christian realized that the way they operate in the world is connected to the outcomes of how the world is – we’d have the kingdom and kin-dom here already on Earth as it is in heaven.

All of this, every last bit, is a call to live counter-culturally. There is this illustration that I have seen used by a racial justice teacher that I think really helps us understand how to look at this. Imagine we are in a fishbowl and the water we’re swimming in is our culture, the world we live in. And that culture is gross, it’s oppressive, it’s toxic, it’s harmful. We have to swim in it – because it’s all around. But we don’t have to accept the waters – we don’t have to invite others into it – because the waters are not livable. We need to find a way to clean out the water – and that’s where servant leadership takes place.

We need leaders in our community to call all of these things to task. We need leaders who are willing to take on the hard tasks and say loudly to whoever will listen, “This is unacceptable, we do not have to live this way, we can do better.” And not just say it, but show it.

For the last 14 years I’ve worked to build or provide housing in central Florida so that my neighbors, ones whose dignity has been challenged through poor living conditions and lack of housing, could have a safe place to call home, and recently a large corporation committed to providing attainable housing and help be part of the solution and not just be part of the problem. You’d think this company was committing a crime the way the public outcry has been! The culture around this project is yelling, “Not in my backyard!” and “What about my property values?” Sadly, very few people are looking around and saying, “Wait, my neighbors can’t afford to live here, and this could help!” And so, I’ve committed to standing with this company. And, you know what, it’s going to cost me something. People are going to say we are in “cahoots,” or that I will benefit in some way, or that my motivations are not true. And, you know what, I’m okay with that. I’m okay with it costing me something. What I’ve learned over these last years is that seeking God’s righteousness and living it out will always come with cultural consequences. I hope though, that when that first family moves into their apartment, and they get to sit around the table, they will know there were people willing to fight for them, willing to give something up, willing to embrace their own “least of these” to make us all better.

We are called by Jesus to serve others and our very souls will be judged for how we go about it. How will we respond? Where will we serve? How can we live differently so that when we encounter the “least of these” we recognize them as the Christ in front of us and the Christ in us?

Every day we get to make the decision of how we are going to live in this world and that decision includes how we will show up for others. Christ was always looking for ways to serve others – because Christ knew that God was already in the mix – doing the work. All we have to do is be willing to look up and get started in where God is calling us. Let the spirit do the good work of discernment in you – let the Spirit challenge you to live differently, to be counter-culture, to question the state of the water, so that when Jesus comes you aren’t left asking, “Where were you, Jesus?” because you’ve seen Christ all along.