

The Walk: Serve
Matthew 20:20-28
Sunday, September 21, 2025

James and John and their mom were perfectly right to ask Jesus what they asked. This scene takes place pretty much at the end of Jesus' ministry, right before his final entry into Jerusalem. At this point, it's clear to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear that Jesus is leading a revolution. And, I think we can assume that since James and John are still following Jesus, they think he's going to win. I mean, after all the miracles they've seen him perform, how could he not win?

And, to the winner go the spoils, right? They had gotten in on the ground floor. They were Jesus' very first followers. They had taken some pretty substantial risks. They'd left the family fishing business at a significant cost to themselves and their families. They had spent the last 3 years basically wandering around from village to village in Galilee as Jesus slowly built up his base of support.

And, of course, the coming revolution wasn't going to be easy. I mean, they weren't just facing the hated and apparently unconquerable Roman Empire. They would also have to neutralize the Jewish religious leadership in Jerusalem. It was going to be hard. It might end up being brutal. And it was going to take a long time.

And so, they wanted the reward for their loyalty, risk, and hard work. They wanted to be Jesus' second and third in command when the revolution was over and Jesus was in control. They just wanted what was theirs; what was fair.

I mean, that's how the world worked back then. You worked hard, you took risks, and with a little bit of luck, you'd get your reward: money, position, power, respect; maybe some prime real estate, a nice house, and servants to look after it all. Nothing wrong with that.

So, they were probably expecting Jesus to say something along the lines of, "Yes, of course. You're my oldest and most loyal friends. Of course you'll be the highest and most trusted officials in my coming kingdom."

But instead, he starts asking them whether they can drink from the cup he's about to drink from. What does that even mean? He says he can't promise them a place in his kingdom. Really? After all they've done? Where's *his* loyalty? Where's his sense of fairness?

So what *is* Jesus saying to them here? Has he lost *his* sense of loyalty and fairness? Well, let's start trying to figure this out with v. 25. At this point in the story, the rest of the apostles have figured out what James and John are trying to do, and they're understandably upset. They've been with Jesus just as long. Why should James and John get special treatment. In fact, each one of those other disciples was probably thinking *they* ought to be Jesus' right hand man.

And so, Jesus says, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." In saying this, Jesus very succinctly exposes for them the dominant cultural framework of their time ... the framework that lies behind the James and John's request and the other apostles' anger: self interest.

Their culture was about everyone looking out for themselves. It was structured like a pyramid. There was a massive lower class of peasants and slaves who supported themselves as best they could, and also supported those above them. Then there were the relatively small

group of artisans and merchants—what we'd call the middle class—who supported the teeny tiny group of rich and powerful folks at the top. The idea was that work—service—started at the bottom and worked its way to the top, so those at the top of the pyramid pretty much just sat around eating the 1st century equivalent of bon bons and being fanned by palm leaves.

And that's where all of Jesus' apostles thought he was leading them; to the top of the pyramid.

So, imagine their confusion when Jesus goes on in v. 26 to say, "²⁶It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave"

Basically, Jesus was talking about turning the pyramid upside down. In his world—his kingdom—the great, the powerful, the leaders, wouldn't live to be served, but to serve. And to Jesus' followers, who were steeped in the right-side-up pyramid values of their culture, this must have sounded like nonsense. What possible basis could Jesus have for thinking such a thing, much less teaching it?

Well, the best place to start in answer that question is at the beginning: with God. As we know, God IS love; the divine, relationship of eternal love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And we were created as an outpouring and manifestation of that love, for the purpose of living in that love; receiving God's love and sharing it back with God and with one another; what Jesus called new, bountiful, eternal life.

But, as we've talked about before, the story of Adam and Eve illustrates how we humans have rejected that relationship. We've chosen selfishness and self-interest over God.

And yet, despite our disobedience, God wasn't willing to leave us there. Starting with Abraham, he initiated a rescue operation to bring us back to how we were created to live. And that rescue operation culminated in God sending His own son—the second person of the Holy Trinity—to earth.

And so, Jesus says in v 28, “²⁸... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Now, I want y'all to think about that for a moment. God, the almighty, eternal, all-knowing creator of everything that exists, voluntarily left eternity, entered into time and space, and even took on human form ... to serve us. Let that sink in. God, in the form of Jesus, became our servant; became *your* servant ... to the point of death ... on a cross.

And why would God do that? Love. It's who God is, and it's what God does.

Which is the reason Jesus can think what he's thinking and teach what he's teaching. It's the reason Jesus can claim that in God's kingdom, the pyramid is upside down.

Jesus is pointing out to his followers that the “normal” world in which they live—a world where value is defined in terms of self-interest, where the top of the pyramid is served by everything underneath and our primary allegiance is to ourselves and our own advancement—that world isn't normal at all. It isn't the way we were created to live.

Real life, new life, eternal life, God's life, is defined in terms of love. Jesus said it. When asked how to get eternal life, he said to love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. And in today's scripture, Jesus makes clear what that love does: love doesn't wait to be served; love serves.

This is the third week in our sermon series, The Walk, in which we're talking about our spiritual walk towards greater closeness and identification with God. And, as we've been discussion, a critical part of that walk is spiritual practices. We've been talking about how, just as we need to practice our swimming to be good swimmers, just as we need to practice our driving to be good drivers, just as we need to practice our reading to be good readers, we need to practice our faith—make it a physical, embodied, reality in our lives—if we want to go any deeper in it.

So, we talked the last couple of weeks about what I think of as “internal” spiritual practices: worship and study; things that are oriented mainly towards changing us on the inside; as I suggested last week, the practices through which we breathe God's presence into ourselves.

Today, we're talking about breathing out. Taking the love of God we've got within us and sharing it with the world through acts of service.

As I mentioned last week, Jesus' little brother James said “faith without works is dead.” And he meant by that that real faith, the kind of faith that leads us to new and eternal life, can't just live in our heads or even our hearts. It's got to work itself out in the world. In Jesus' upside down world, love isn't a noun, it's a verb.

When we serve, we aren't just holding beliefs in our head. We aren't just talking about how great Jesus is. We're actually *following* him. Doing what he did. Behaving the way he behaved. I mean, his whole life, at least as far as we see in the gospels, was about service. He was an itinerant preacher, bringing the Good News of new life to anyone who would listen. And wherever he went, he healed people. When we serve, we're imitating him.

And the mystery of it is, as we do so, we are changed. Anyone who has been on a mission trip or really any kind of service project will tell you: in serving, you are blessed. You are brought into contact with how you were created to live and something deep inside you knows it. And you are changed. You become just a little more like Christ ... just a little more likely to serve.

Now, some of y'all might be wondering, "How do we actually do this service thing?" Well, if you are, you've come to the right place. We have all kinds of opportunities for you to serve, both inside and outside of this congregation and community. Just ask me or Salina or Kirsten or anyone on staff and we can get you hooked up.

But service isn't just the big project. It's rooted first, as Jesus tried to demonstrate in today's scripture, in an attitude of humility and of loving those around you. It can be as simple as treating the people around you with basic respect and kindness, regardless of whether you agree with them politically or even in terms of faith; being genuinely interested in who they are and what they think is important. It could be as simple as holding a door for someone, or greeting them with a genuine smile.

If you were in our Methodism 101 study a few weeks ago, you'll remember John Wesley believed in a thing called Christian Perfection. Now, he didn't mean by that that we could ever get to the point we never make any mistakes. What he meant is that it was possible for us to grow in our faith to the point where everything we think, everything we say, and everything we do is motivated by love of God and love of neighbor. It isn't just thinking good things about Jesus, but living out God's love. Just think what the world would be like if we really dedicated ourselves to that ideal. How would your life change? How about the lives of those close to you?

