

## **November 5 – A Servant's Heart**

Matthew 23:1-12

Today we again gather as a community of faith to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is a meal shared in remembrance of that last meal Jesus ate with his disciples. Some years ago a reading in a devotional book had a title that challenged me and has stayed with me. The title? "Who Did the Dishes?" It talks about how the disciples went ahead to prepare the Passover meal. The Gospels share some about what occurred during that meal. But then it says, "they sang a hymn and went out." The devotional reading asks, "Who stayed behind to do the dishes?" Have you ever thought about that? Someone, most likely more than one, was left behind to clean up. These unnamed women, most likely, were left with the task of dealing with the leftovers, washing the dishes and putting everything away. When you are serving a meal for 13 men, plus how many other unnamed guests, that is a lot of work! It had to be done and yet we never think about them.

In our scripture, that was read today, we hear Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees with their elaborate prayer shawls and how they liked the best spots at banquets. We then hear the challenge that "The greatest among you will be your servant. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted." This idea of servanthood is one that continues to challenge us, confuse us and more.

First of all, these words are a celebration of servanthood. Too often we tend to downplay the importance of serving. After all, anyone could do the dishes in my example. Yet, someone had to stay behind. Maybe they too wanted to be with Jesus. They expected him to return and he wouldn't want to come back to a room filled with dirty dishes. You wouldn't expect him to do them when he got back. It was a job that had to be done. Servanthood is often doing a job because someone has to do it. It isn't glamorous, no one notices, usually, that you are doing it but they sure notice if it doesn't get done!

There are two ways to approach getting the job done. Some do it, but they feel put upon. They feel used, they are grumpy about it and often let others know how this isn't their job! That is not working with a servant heart. And yes, the complaint is sometimes valid. None of us want others to just assume we will do something because we have always done it, so we need to be sensitive to this. Others tackle a servant job with grace. Yes, it needs to be done and why not them! They don't feel put upon but instead see that what they are doing is part of a greater whole. They may not always do the task with joy but they roll up their sleeves and tackle it with a giving heart.

I wonder what attitude the people had who were left to do the dishes. Were they grumbling that they always end up doing the dishes or did they see this as, in some way, being in ministry to Jesus? I believe the job of a servant, being humble, is as much about attitude as it is about the job being done.

Where are you asked to work? How do you approach those tasks? Do you see the work within the greater whole and celebrate your part, or do you feel put upon? These are some of the questions this scripture asks.

Another thing this scripture brings up is the question: "Is it all right to praise the servant?" You would be amazed how often this question comes up in churches. We have a quiet Christian who lovingly goes about a task for years. Someone decides it is time to say thank you. It is a sweet gesture that unleashes all sorts of other questions. Since they have volunteered to do this should we make them an example? By saying thank you to them are we going to make others upset because we didn't thank them? Are they going to be embarrassed by being singled out? Often, the church ends up doing nothing, which to me is a shame.

I hear these words of Jesus talking exactly about these situations. Those who do things, not for praise, but because the job needs to be done and does it in a loving way should be lifted up as an example. We need to remember that such a thing is not to compare their work with others. It should not make others feel bad. In fact we should hold on to the idea that when one is praised all are praised.

I remember in the Moscow Idaho United Methodist Church we had a quiet servant. Vivian would come over a couple of times a month to take care of the kitchen. The church had a kitchen committee but the kitchen was heavily used, just like ours. Things tend to get misplaced and messy. Vivian would go about organizing drawers and cupboards. She would clean out the fridge, wipe down counter tops and generally get things looking good. I knew of her quiet work because she would often come into the office asking for a bit of help, like my moving the big coffee maker so she could clean under and behind it. Her health declined and she was forced to move to assisted living so her ability to pop in came to an end. Within weeks everyone noticed a change in the kitchen, not for the better! Soon I was hearing about how messy or dirty it was. The church realized what a gift she had given to us all for years and years. We paused to say thanks as we reorganized ourselves to do her work!!

As much as we praise the quiet servant we also are aware that there needs to be someone in charge. Without some level of organization, you have chaos. I have experienced this in churches where everyone had a good heart, was willing to pitch in and help, but no one felt called to step up and take charge. I recall how in one church they had a sign-up sheet for hosting coffee hour. If you signed up you came a little early to make the coffee, provided the cookies and cleaned up afterwards. No one wanted to coordinate this task so sometimes we had hosts and coffee and other times people would come and then scramble to get coffee started while someone headed off to the store to get cookies. It was a highly stressful start to Sundays. One woman had enough. She then took it upon herself to go around coffee hour with the sign-up sheet and ask people to host a week. Most people were glad to help when asked. She would call them on the Thursday before they were to host to remind them. From then on coffee hour happened without stress. This one woman saw her servant hat was to organize things so everyone else would work! So sometimes servanthood is not just quietly behind the scenes but a willingness to step forward and lead so others can follow.

Ultimately, what I hear in these verses is a call to value each person's contribution. What I see as the reason Jesus was upset with the Pharisees was the fact that they went around acting important. By the way they dressed, by the way they acted,

by the things that they expected from others, they were saying we are better than the rest of you! That sense of arrogance and entitlement will always get you into trouble eventually. All should be praised for the work they do. I have to believe Jesus, before he left the upper room that last time, stopped and looked at those who were going to remain behind and do the dishes and said, "Thank you. Thank you for helping to make this night special. It wouldn't have happened without you." He would have valued their contribution and seen it as having an integral function as important as anything he had done for without them, the meal would not occur.

I have a favorite story I want to end with. It is from a book called "Safed and Ketura" and it called the millionaire and the scrub lady.

#### The Millionaire and the Scrublady

There is a certain Millionaire, who hath his Offices on the Second Floor of the First National Bank Building. And when he goeth up to his Offices he rideth in the Elevator, but when he goeth down, then he walketh.

And he is an Haughty Man, who once was poor, and hath risen in the World, and he is Self-made man who worshipeth his maker.

And he payeth his Rent regularly on the first day of the month, and he considereth not that there are Human Beings who run the Elevators, and who Clean the Windows, hanging at a great height above the Sidewalk, and who shovel Coal into the furnaces under the Boilers. Neither doth he at Christmas time remember any of them with a Tip or a Turkey.

And there is in that Building a Poor Woman who Scrubbeth the Stairs and the Halls. And he hath walked past her often but hath never seen her until Recently. For his head was high in the air, and he was thinking of More Millions.

Now it came to pass on a day that he left his Office, and started to walk down the Stairs.

And the Scrublady was halfway down; for she had begun at the top, and was giving the stairs their First Onceover. And upon the topmost Stair, it a wet and

soapy spot, there was a Large Cake of Yellow Soap. And the Millionaire stepped upon it.

Now the foot which he set upon the Soap flew eastward toward the Sunrise, and the other foot started on an expedition of its own toward the going down of the Sun. And the Millionaire sat down upon the Topmost Step, but he did not remain there. As it had been his Intention to Descend, so he Descended, but not in the manner of his Original Design. For he descended faster, and he struck each step with a sound as it had been of a Drum.

And the Scrublady stood aside courteously, and let him go. And he stayed not on the order of his going.

And at the bottom he arose, and considered whether he should rush into the Office of the Building and demand that the Scrublady be fired; but he considered that if he should tell the reason there would be great Mirth among the occupants of the Building. And so he held his peace.

But since that day he taketh notice of the Scrublady, and passeth her with Circumspection.

For there is no man so high or mighty that he can afford to ignore any of his fellow human beings. For a very Humble Scrublady and a very common bar of Yellow Soap can take the mind of a Great Man off his Business Troubles with surprising rapidity.

Wherefore, consider these things, and count not thyself too high above even the humblest of the children of God.

Lest haply thou come down from thy place of pride and walk off with thy bruises aching a little more by reason of thy suspicion that the Scrublady is Smiling into her Suds, and facing the day's work the more cheerfully by reason of the fun thou hast afforded her.

For these are solemn days, and he that bringeth a smile to the face of a Scrublady hath not lived in vain.