

“Serving Others”

The customer is always right. Isn't that right? I suppose there may be exceptions to that rule, but there's a reason that so many of us have heard that rule. “The customer is always right” provides a simple summary of the way that someone providing a service can best serve his customers. Consider the example of a restaurant. The server who adheres to the rule will do all he can to make sure that his customers are satisfied. Even if he knows that the meat is cooked to perfection, he'll send it back if the customer insists. Even if he usually leaves a wedge of lemon in the water glass, he'll get them a clean and lemon-free glass if that's their preference. Even if they happen to be terribly rude to him, he'll treat them kindly and take care of them.

If you are going to abide by “the customer is always right,” you have to have a mindset that says, “the customer is in charge; they are more important than I am.”

That's the same sort of attitude that Jesus describes when he asks, **“who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?”** And while the picture is similar, Jesus isn't talking about a restaurant where a waiter is seeking tips. He is talking about the way meals were often served at the time when he lived. A servant or a slave had the job of serving a meal to his master, the master's family, and any guests that were gathered there with him. So it was a general rule: the one at the table, the one eating, was greater than the one serving the food.

It just so happens that Jesus made this observation at a time when he and his disciples were together eating food. The words of our sermon text from Luke 22 record the events of Maundy Thursday, the night when Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples and instituted for them a new meal, that of Holy Communion. We hear in Luke's Gospel how Jesus, after instituting Communion, warned his disciples about the traitor that was in their midst, one who would later betray Jesus.

Of course, Jesus' revelation prompted questions from the disciples. Who could possibly do this? Why would any of us? But the conversation eventually shifted from who is this worst disciple who would betray Jesus into who is the greatest disciple.

That's the way human beings operate, isn't it? We like to know who's the greatest, who's the best. How many lists are out there to tell us who's the best actor or the best athlete? And of course, we'd be more than happy to make the case for ourselves. Even if I'm not the best ever, I'm certainly better than many, maybe most. I'm certainly better than those around me. And it wouldn't hurt for people to treat me that way.

That's the way of the world. That's the way it was at Jesus' time. **Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.”** In the same way that the disciples each wanted the top spot and the recognition that went along with it, leaders at the highest level in their society boasted of those high positions. Kings used their authority to lord over the people. Roman Caesars demanded titles like “Benefactor” even when they had done little or nothing to deserve such a title.

“Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?” The way of the world is to long to sit at the table, to have others serve us. We almost demand it don't we? How dare someone disrespect us? How dare someone have the nerve to question our expertise? How dare someone not give us the thanks or the credit that we are due? In our own way we sit at the table and demand, “come and serve me. Come and notice and acknowledge how great I am.”

And Jesus says, **“But I am among you as one who serves.”**

I can imagine the scene playing out something like this on that Maundy Thursday evening in the upper room. The disciples, as they hear Jesus' question about who is the greatest keep on chatting about it, still half-way carrying on their discussions in the background. When Jesus asks, **“Is it not the one who is at**

the table?” they probably nod and maybe even audibly agree with him. And when he says, **“But I am among you as one who serves”** they fall completely silent. They haven’t yet fully grasped what he is saying with these words, but they realize this: they messed up. Again.

Those disciples remember how at the beginning of the meal Jesus took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of every one of them. He did what a servant would do. He did what a slave would do. He did what none of them would have even imagined themselves doing up until that moment. And then they started arguing about which one of them was the greatest. The sharp contrast between their behavior and their master’s behavior was painfully obvious. They could feel that uneasy feeling in the pit of their stomachs that told them in no uncertain terms that they had failed. And they knew without a doubt that God could not possibly be happy with that sort of behavior.

Think about your own life. Think about your own heart. Hear the words of Jesus asking you to think about who is the greatest. Consider the many times that you have wanted to be great, whether in your own eyes or in the eyes of others. And draw your own conclusions. Jesus came as a servant. Could the contrast between him and us be any greater? Could it be any more clear how we have fallen short of God’s intentions for us?

But Jesus came to serve. The Lord, the Creator of the Universe, God from all eternity, one who is undeniably the greatest came among his people not to sit at the table and to be served in the way he truly deserved. No, Jesus came to serve. He came to treat you and me and every other sinful human being as if they were the most important person in the world. He came to give us what was best. He said, “Even though you don’t deserve anything good, sit at my table. Let me go and earn and win for you the forgiveness of sins, release from guilt and punishment, eternal salvation.” And he serves forgiveness to us in portions unimaginably generous, even as we still struggle with our innate selfishness.

That very Maundy Thursday evening, as Jesus prepared for what he knew was coming—the betrayal and arrest that would lead to his death—Jesus served. He washed his disciples’ feet like the lowest of servants. He fed them his miraculous meal of bread and wine and his body and blood. He instructed those disciples to reassure and strengthen them for the difficult path that lay ahead of them as well.

And still today, Jesus serves us with his Word, which tells us of his amazing, serving love. He serves us that same precious meal of his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. He strengthens us for the difficulties we face on our journey to our heavenly home.

And he calls on us to serve others. He invites us as we are moved by his great love to love those around us, and then to put that love into action by giving our time and our talents and our treasures to meet their needs.

And all around us are opportunities to serve. In our various situations in life, as employees, friends, parents, children, spouses, or even sometimes as complete strangers, we can serve others by helping them when they need help. In the faces of those in need, we see our Savior. By serving them, we are serving him. And when we serve those in need, we are reflecting his love to them. We become, as Luther was fond of saying, “masks of God” as God serves our neighbors through our efforts.

The customer may not always be right, and the server in a restaurant may bristle at the idea that he is. We may, like the disciples, wish to label ourselves as the greatest whenever we have the opportunity. In a worldly way, the one sitting at the table will always be greater than the one who serves. The philosopher Plato even asked, “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?”

But Jesus says, **“you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”** Our lives as Christians are not about being the greatest. My life is not about what I can do for me. Our goal is to serve the Savior who has served us. And we serve him by serving those he has put into our lives.

Sermon Text: Luke 22:24–27 (NIV84)

²⁴ Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”