

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Matthew 20:20-28  
**SERMON SERIES:** A Commitment to Keep  
**SERMON:** Service

When joining the United Methodist Church, we're asked this question: *As a member of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness* ("witness" is a new addition to the list as of 2008)? The anticipated response is: *I will!* So for those of us who are members of this congregation, we have a commitment to keep and over these past few weeks we've been taking a look at each element of this commitment. Today the focus is on *service*.

Our scripture reading is from Matthew 20:20-28. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. He has just told the twelve disciples for a third time that the Son of Man will be handed over, condemned, tortured, crucified and on the third day, raised from the dead. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE READING.**

Back in 2001, business author Jim Collins wrote a bestselling book entitled *Good to Great*. I find his opening words intriguing: *Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life.*<sup>1</sup>

Now I don't know about you, but when it comes to our church, I don't want to settle for good, I want us to be great. But in saying this, I had best be careful because as we just heard, the type of greatness we seek makes a huge difference to Jesus.

For example, if we're after the kind of greatness that the mother of the sons of Zebedee sought for her two boys, we've got some learning to do. For her, greatness was about places of

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. New York: Collins, 2001, 1.

honor and power and authority. Greatness was about the higher place, the superior place, the dominant place. The greatness she sought for her sons is the kind of greatness that stirs the competitive juices in those who would be rivals. It whips up jealousy. It generates anger—as we saw in the story—among those would-be-rivals who fear a loss of prestige for themselves. This is the kind of greatness sought by the rulers of this world who are always looking to control and dominate others.

Did you know that Dr. Martin Luther King once preached a sermon on this theme? His sermon title was *The Drum Major Instinct*. According to Dr. King, we all want to lead the parade. He noted that this impulse traces back to infancy when our very first cry is itself a bid for attention. As we grow up, this instinct gives rise to competition with our neighbors as we try *to outdo the Joneses*; it distorts our personalities as we crave attention for ourselves; it can lead to criminal behavior; it gives rise to classism and racism; it's an instinct that even drives nations and peoples to war.<sup>2</sup>

But then Jesus comes along and says: *This is not my way. Whoever wishes to great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave*. My brothers and sisters, greatness in the way of Jesus is about service; it's about serving others.

Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. He gave his life for others. Matthew describes this self-giving as a ransom; it's an image from the slave market. A ransom is paid to set a slave free. So the self-giving of the Son of Man sets us free from slavery to the ways of the world that are about self-seeking and domination over others, so that we can serve as Jesus served—even if our service gets us in trouble—even if it causes us suffering—even if it results in death.

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<sup>2</sup> King, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. "Drum Major Instinct." <http://www.blackwebportal.com/wire/DA.cfm?ArticleID=513> (accessed September 19, 2009).

Let me tell a story about the Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. This congregation was formed in 1977. By 1990, the church had developed a reputation for a certain kind of “greatness”. The congregation had grown from a handful of people to over 2,500 members. They were doing everything right—or so they thought. They used team preaching; they had a thriving small group ministry; they sought to equip and empower people for ministry; the worship services were passionate; their vision was strong and focused; they reached out to seekers; they used results oriented planning.

But then, reality hit them in the face. The church leadership sensed that something was wrong. They did a study of the congregation. They discovered that their people were feeling unchallenged and stifled. The excitement-level of the church had dramatically declined. The people had been told that they were being equipped, but equipped for what? Pastor Robert Lewis reached this conclusion.<sup>3</sup> He writes: *Honestly, the larger we had become, the more preoccupied we had become—with ourselves.*<sup>4</sup>

What was missing? A commitment to service. Once Fellowship Bible Church made this commitment to serve others, they discovered greatness of a different kind. This is how Pastor Lewis describes what happened to him and to his people: *I noticed the changed lives that resulted from members investing their lives in helping families in a low-income area known as Eastgate. I observed the impact of doctors from our church who set up a medical clinic at a home for unwed mothers. I felt a sense of God’s pleasure as I joined hundreds one Saturday to clean up neighborhoods, repair homes, and complete other projects. I noted that city leaders were beginning to view Fellowship Bible Church as a force for good in the community. And wonderfully, I saw people who were formerly hardened to, and skeptical of,*

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<sup>3</sup>Lewis, Robert with Wilkins, Rob. *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 15.

*the gospel soften and embrace Christ.*<sup>5</sup>

Now I don't know about you, but when it comes to our church, I don't want to settle for good, I want us to be great—but it's greatness that comes through the servant way of Jesus. So we have a commitment to keep.

I leave you with Dr. King's closing words from his sermon about the drum major instinct: *If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long....Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.*

*I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody....I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you say that I tried to love and serve humanity....*

*Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.*<sup>6</sup>

My brothers and sisters, this sounds like greatness to me, so we have a commitment to keep. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>6</sup> King, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. "Drum Major Instinct." <http://www.blackwebportal.com/wire/DA.cfm?ArticleID=513> (accessed September 19, 2009).