

S-S-S

The Rev. Linda W. McFadden
First & St. Stephens UCC, Baltimore, MD
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Isaiah 53:4-12, Mark 10:35-45

If we were on Sesame Street this morning instead of in church, we could say that this sermon is being brought to you by the letter “S.” As it happens, our reflections for the next few minutes are centered around three words, all beginning with “S.”

The first “S” is for Self. Most of us are more interested in our Selves than anything else. You’ve probably noticed that other people hardly ever accord you the special treatment you think you deserve. Inside each of us is a little tyrant called Self who wants to be emperor/empress of the universe. Self always wants to ride in the front seat. Self wants the job with the corner office. Self wants to go to Disney World and be escorted past all the crowds to the front of the line.

Lou Holtz, the celebrated football coach, once shared a favorite fantasy with an interviewer. He said, “Sure, it’s nice to be recognized, but you know what I’d really like to do? I’d like to go to the Vatican some day and meet the pope. He’d say, ‘Lou, how’s it going?’ Then we’d ride around the Vatican in his special car. After that he would invite me to go out on that little balcony with him to greet the crowd. We’d look out at that sea of faces of thousands of pilgrims, and somebody in the crowd would say, ‘Hey! Who’s that up there with Mr. Holtz?’”

Most of us lack the perspective to laugh at our own Self-centeredness. The only thing that’s funny about James and John, who are right up there with the rest of us in the “Me First” department, is their timing. Jesus has just told the disciples for the third time about what’s waiting for him in Jerusalem, and he goes into some shocking detail about it. So the Zebedee boys pick that precise moment to ask if they can reserve the most prestigious seats in heaven.

Tom Long’s take on this episode is that it plays like a scene from a war movie. The part of Jesus, the commander, is played by Mel Gibson, and he’s backed up by his troops, played by Larry, Moe, and Curly. They’re out there on the battlefield, the platoon is trapped by enemy fire, and their only hope is to make a suicidal charge. Jesus says, “Okay, I’m going to jump out of this foxhole, run through the mine fields, up past the machine gun nest, to the top of that hill over there. I will probably die in the process, but some of you might get through. Now, who is with me?” The disciples turn to him and say, “We have matching blazers and ties. Can we sit on either side of the hill with you when we get there?” Jesus says, “The question is, are you able to go through the mine fields and the machine guns?” Larry, Moe, and Curly say, “Oh, that, oh, sure.”

That’s how out of touch we can be when Self with a capital S is in charge of our lives.

In contrast to our habitual Self-absorption, Jesus offers an alternative that also happens to begin with an S. The word is “Servant.” In the midst of all the pushing and shoving for dibs to sit next him on his throne in glory, Jesus steps down from the seat of honor and says, “No, no, I came to serve you.” He takes the basin and towel, kneels down, and washes the dirt of the road from their feet. He climbs up on the cross and gives up his life for us, to show what he means by his words: *“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45).*

He invites us to follow his example, to be Servants rather than Selves, but if we try to imitate him, we find it’s not easy to do. The French priest Abbe Pierre devoted his life to work among the homeless and refugees. One day he was called to help a family that was living in the fields in a crude shelter. Two of the children had died and a third was seriously ill. His encounter with that family sparked an epiphany for Abbe Pierre:

I realized that so long as people who were supposed to be apostles, as long as a priest like me, was incapable of saying to that poor woman, ‘Come on, get your things, pick up your child and come along with me and your husband and sleep in my room. I’ll take your place in the tent, and

tomorrow we'll find some way of solving this.' Until then, well, fundamentally, I was simply an imposter.

We are called to be Servants, but often we are Selves simply playing at servanthood. We approach spiritual life with the idea that it's going to make us better, more successful Selves. We think it will put a glossy shine on our ambitious striving toward the better job and the house with more closet space to shelter our secret sins, our private prejudices, our broken relationships. We want to "be all we can be" on our own terms. We want God to help us accomplish our personal agendas.

The journey from a life centered in Self to one of Servanthood comes about through the third S-word, the conscious spiritual practice called "Stewardship." We often use that word narrowly, to refer to financial support of the church or to what we call "Time/Talent/Treasure," and it certainly includes that. Really, Stewardship is our accountability for our lives. When we operate out of Self-centeredness, life is haunted by scarcity. Greedy, fearful Self tells us that there is never enough to go around—not enough money, not enough energy, not enough time. Life is a battle to hang onto what little money is left after taxes and expenses and what little time is left after work and family life. No wonder we're frazzled and resentful. Operating out of Self, none of us is a skilled enough administrator to ration out our time, talent, and treasure equitably and remain a sane person.

Once you understand yourself to be a Servant of Christ, though, your whole life belongs to God. And once that's settled, things become remarkably simple. Your life is for one purpose only—to serve God's agenda for the world.

In 1722, the city of Leipzig was looking for a new cantor and organist. The first man the town council chose declined the job. Their second choice also turned them down. Finally, frustrated because excellence seemed unavailable to them, they decided they would just have to settle for a mediocre musician. They hired their third choice, a man named Johann Sebastian Bach.

Many of Bach's manuscripts have at the top the initials "J.J.," which stands for "Jesu juva" ("Jesus help me"). At the end, he often wrote "S.D.G." for "soli Deo gloria" ("to God alone be the glory"). Bach wrote not for his own glorification but as a Servant, for the glory of God. As a servant of God, this "mediocre" music master composed some of the most sublime music ever heard.

None of us is in Bach's league, musically speaking. But try to imagine what your life would be like if you dedicated it to the glory of God—your work, your leisure, your relationships. Suppose that every morning when you got up, you prayed, "Jesus, help me." Suppose that everything you did, every class you taught, every phone call you made, every report you wrote, every mess you cleaned up, was for the greater glory of God. Wouldn't that make a difference in how you felt about your life? You would also discover that there are a lot of things you couldn't do for the glory of God. You couldn't do work that was harmful or repeat malicious gossip or get even with anybody. You couldn't pass by somebody who needed help, no matter how busy you were.

Stewardship is the path of Servanthood. If your whole reason for being is to glorify God, your decisions about what you do with your money and how you spend your time become much easier.

Someone has said, "There is a nobler ambition in life than merely to stand tall in the world. It is to reach down and lift humankind a little higher." Jesus was equal with God, but he humbled himself to become our servant so that we might in turn become the servants of others. God is glorified when we concern ourselves not primarily with the altitude of our climb upward in the world but with the hunger and thirst of others.

Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.