

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 29th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)  
“on serving, not being served”

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Reflections on **Isaiah 53: 10-11; Heb. 4: 14-16; Mk. 10: 35-45**

**A**s many of you know, my life at present is dominated by our daughter and two grandsons (age 7 and 9), who have come to live with us. So I can't help hearing today's gospel through the lens of this new reality. With two little boys in the house there is a lot of blatant jockeying for power and precedence – and they are not socialized enough to be embarrassed about it! “I'm the boss,” seven-year-old Jacob loudly proclaims; “I always get my way.”

Now James and John are not that blatant, though their ploy is obvious enough to rouse the indignation of the other disciples, who perhaps lacked the nerve to ask for the best seats for themselves. At any rate, it does not reflect well on the two brothers, so it is not surprising that when Matthew tells the same story, he has their *mother* make this request instead, as if to spare the reputations of two of the more important disciples.

Ironically, James' and John's request for the two highest seats of honor “when [Jesus] come[s] into [his] kingdom” comes immediately after Jesus' third warning that he is going to be condemned to death and handed over to the Romans for execution. Clearly, James and John (again like my grandsons!) have not really been listening. So Jesus has to warn them that they, like he, will face suffering, and that, as his disciples, they must not follow the example of “the Gentiles,” that is, the Romans, who throw their weight around. He sums it all up in a classic statement of his mission:

*The Son of Man has come not to be served,  
but to serve, and to give his life in ransom  
for the many*

In effect, when they ask to sit in the seats of honor beside him, he says, “That's not what I am

here for – to sit on a throne and have others serve me. No, I am here to serve the needs of others and to spend my life – ultimately to give my life – freeing as many people as possible from whatever enslaves them.” Liberation from slavery, or captivity, is what the word “ransom” means, after all.

I say “spend” his life, not just “give” it, because I think we have a tendency to jump to the end of the story – both Jesus' story and our own. We pass lightly over Jesus' earthly ministry and hurry on to his passion, the part that “redeems us from sin.” And, like James and John, we skip over our call to a discipleship of service, focusing on our personal hereafter, to ensure that we have what some have called our “evacuation plan for heaven.”

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This saying of Jesus is perhaps his clearest expression of two key ideas: what we have come to call “servant leadership,” and the *cost* of servanthood; or in other words, the cost of discipleship.

First, *the Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve*. When my grandson Jakob declared himself to be “the boss” we had to tell him, “No, your mother is the boss of your family, and grandma and grandpa are the bosses of this house. And what do you think the boss does? She makes sure that everyone has food and clean clothes, goes to school, and gets cared for when they get hurt or sick.” “The boss” sees that everyone gets a fair share (the boys do care about that one!), that everyone does a fair share of the work (that's not so popular), and that they are

recognized and appreciated for their contribution. Everyone is listened to, so they can have their say, present their complaints, and make suggestions; they are consulted about important decisions, even if they don't always get their way.

This “servant leadership” describes an ideal family, but it also describes a well-run nation, workplace, or church. As any parent knows, being a good “boss” does not feed one's ego or sense of power; it means putting one's own needs and interests second, and serving the needs of everybody else first.

I think we already know this, because we give lip service to it in both our religious and secular lives – that's why we speak of “ministers” and “public servants” – but we all have to keep working to make it “real.”

Jesus goes on to say that *The Son of Man came . . . to give his life in ransom for the many*. The cost of servanthood can be very high at times, as not only our gospel, but our other readings for today make clear. Our first reading is from the end of the last “servant song” of the prophet we call Second Isaiah.

These songs were written during ancient Israel's great national trauma, the exile. God's dwelling place on earth, their temple, had been burned down; so . . . where was God?

The last king in David's line had been hauled off to prison in Babylon; so . . . what happened to God's promise that the house of David would stand forever?

Worst of all, Israel had lost its land, the Promised Land; so . . . what became of the promise made to Abraham, the promise that Moses and Joshua, through so many trials, had brought to fulfillment?

The exile was a great national crisis, but especially a spiritual one, a long, dark night of the soul for Israel. This dark period was also very fruitful, though I am sure it didn't feel that way. This is when the ancient Jewish religion grew beyond a belief in a tribal God and opened up to a deeper, more universal understanding of YHWH. The Hebrew Scriptures – what Christians call the Old Testament – reflect this whole process, with different strands of thought, and varying attempts to make sense of what happened.

When terrible things happen, many people ask, “What did I do wrong?” Well, Israel, to its credit, always had plenty of prophets to point out the nation's failings, from Elijah, Amos, and Hosea, to Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

And during the Exile, Israel's scholars pulled together a written history of their nation, stringing the separate pieces together with a strong motif of national disobedience and divine punishment. If we focus on those parts of the Old Testament – the books of Samuel and Kings – we get our rather stereotyped picture of the “Old Testament God” as wrathful and punitive.

But that was only one strand, one response to the mystery of this great national disaster. The prophet we call “Second Isaiah,” had a very different cast of mind and spirit. Instead of looking for an explanation for what happened, he lived in the mystery of what was, with all its suffering. He saw, and pondered, the suffering of the *innocent*, and “sang” about it in poetic language.

Today's first reading IS poetry, a “song,” to be understood more with the heart than the head. It is an alternative interpretation to the historians' explanation that said “we are all getting what we deserved.” It is a meditation that ranges over a number of responses to the innocent suffering of this mysterious figure.

Yes, I know that today's reading, taken from the end of the song, starts out with a very disturbing verse: *Yet Yahweh chose to crush him with pain*. The poet has just finished taking us through several stages of emotions: *he had no form or majesty that we should look at him* – he was to all appearances an ordinary guy; he was *despised and rejected* . . .

*a man of sorrows whom we accounted stricken, struck down by God* . . . There's that all-too-human tendency to say “he must have done something to deserve this!” But no; as we now see, he was innocent, and we wronged him – *he was wounded for our transgressions . . . by his bruises we are healed*. His suffering, therefore, has brought about a change for the better in us.

The reading goes on to say that yes, his suffering was awful, but it was not in vain:

*he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of Yahweh shall*

*prosper.*

And, most important for later Christian theology,  
*The righteous one, my servant, shall make  
many righteous,*  
or in another translation, *he shall justify many.*

That is, he shall bring these many into a right relationship with God and others. This is a relationship where people are free to flourish as God intended. The servant has become a blessing for the world.

Jesus, of course, would have known this passage, and so would his followers in the early church, who were not slow to recognize how well Jesus fit this image.

Scholars are virtually unanimous in recognizing a link between that last verse of Isaiah's, about *justifying many* (or *making many righteous*) and the last line of our gospel passage, about *giving his life as a ransom for many*. This means that we really have to understand what the original Hebrew says. Only then can we fully appreciate what Jesus, who was speaking in Aramaic, derived from Hebrew, might have said. Mark, of course had to translate it all into Greek, the version that has come down to us in his gospel. And here we have a translation problem.

Isaiah's word for "many" means "countless," an infinite number; there is no limit to the number of people the servant makes right with God. My husband reminds me of a time when we asked

one of our small our children to count as high as she could. Then, when we asked what came next, she screwed up her face with all the frustration of not having a word big enough, and said "many, many!" That is what the Hebrew word means: multitudes, myriads, gazillions.

But for us, "many" does not have that open-ended, limitless quality – we hear "many, but not all." So a literal translation, one based on the letter, destroys the spirit of the biblical text. We end up with a too-small version of God's salvation. We think Jesus gave his life *not* for countless numbers of people, but "for many, not all."

Whether we say, in our Eucharistic prayer that, the blood of Jesus was shed "for many" (as the recent Roman revision requires) instead of "for all" makes a real difference. Perhaps "for many, but not all" then gets translated into "for us, but not them," "them" being whatever person or group we look down on.

Thankfully, here at Beatitudes, we do not feel bound by Vatican directives, so we can move into our Eucharistic prayer and affirm with confidence that *all* are welcomed. At the same time, our own discipleship, following the example of our servant-leader Jesus, should lead us also to renew our commitment to serve everyone, *all* the people we encounter in our daily lives.