

Sermon Series: Foundations

“Serve” by Jeff McClain

Matthew 20:20-28

Boone UMC

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Several years ago, I started running two miles a few times a week. After I'd been doing it for a while I learned about a “fun run” in my neighborhood. It was a 5K, just over three miles. A friend of mine was running and asked if I'd want to do it, too. I was feeling pretty good about my running, so I said “Sure, sign me up!” I'd been running two miles regularly. Surely I'd be able to do three.

When race day arrived, the first two miles were no problem. But then a funny thing happened. My legs got tired, and I started to get winded and short of breath. People started passing me. At first I was fine with it. Yeah, these people look like real runners. They've got the gear – the shoes, the shirts, the shorts. But then something else happened. I got passed by this little kid. He couldn't have been more than about 8 years old. The worst part was he looked like he wasn't even trying. He didn't have a cell phone, but he might as well have – just sitting there texting his friends, *Yeah, just running this race, I'm almost done though.* I could see him taking my picture. *Check it out, just passed this old dude! Don't think he's gonna make it, LOL! See you in a few.*

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. I got passed by a brand new mom. How do I know she was a new mom, you ask? Well, because she was pushing her tiny little baby..in a stroller...right past me. No problem for her. Meanwhile I'm huffing and puffing, “I think I can, I think I can...” Who knew a mile could be so tough! I had no idea. Turns out I didn't really know what I was getting into.

I wonder how often we sign up for things without understanding the full implications. How often do we say yes without knowing full cost, what it's really going to take? I wonder how often we do that in regards to following Jesus? We'll see that illustrated in today's text.

Matthew 20:20-28¹

20 *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21* *And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."*

22 *But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23* *He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."*

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Foundations Series Recap² – Worship, Connect, Serve, Grow

- Born out the work of our Vision Team
 - o Strategies for living out our mission
 - Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ.
 - o Strategies for producing followers of Jesus at BUMC
- Do these four things on regular basis: Worship, Connect, Serve, Grow
 - o Giving God a chance to work in and through you
 - o Goal: transformed lives
 - Lives that look more like Jesus

SERVE

Sometimes it's helpful when reading scripture to take a step back and read a little more than just the section you're interested in. If we do that in this case, a theme emerges in Matthew: the kingdom of God.

First, when the disciples send the children away from Jesus, Jesus rebukes the disciples and says that kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Next in Matthew's gospel there are two parables, one about a rich man asking about eternal life and the other about laborers in the field who all start at different times but receive the same pay in the end. Both parables finish with the same line about life in the kingdom of God: "the last will be first and the first will be last."

So how does the kingdom of God inform James and John's request? There are political implications here. There's power at stake. Some of Jesus' followers understood his claims about his mission to mean he was going to overthrow Rome, destroy the current social and political landscape, and usher in a new kingdom – the kingdom of God.

And it turns out they were right. Jesus did inaugurate his reign and usher in a new kingdom. But it didn't look quite like the disciples thought it would, and it didn't happen on their timeline. In

fact, to this day we're still waiting for God's kingdom to fully come on earth as it is in heaven. In the disciples' day though, they thought it was going to happen immediately. It'd be fulfilled in their lifetime. And James and John wanted a piece of the action, a prime seat at the power table.

When I was kid we drove a station wagon with the third row facing backwards. That was always the most coveted seat, the one everyone wanted. And the way it was usually decided was by which kid was the first to call it. "I get back seat!" "No, I get back seat." "Too bad, I already called it." And that settled it. You gotta call it first!

James and John are trying to call dibbs on the best seats (or have their mom do it for them). Jesus is trying to teach them about the kingdom of God, and they're playing games. They're acting like kids. And they're clearly not listening to Jesus anyway. Jesus twice just finished saying the last will be first and the first will be last. If they had been paying attention they would've called dibbs on "last" instead.

Not only are they not paying attention, they're also signing up for something they don't really understand. Jesus warns them – do you have any idea what you're asking? Do you really get the implications? Can you drink the cup I am about to drink?

Jesus knows what's coming, and he's already told the disciples, too. In the section just prior to today's reading Jesus tells them point blank³ "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised." Jesus knows exactly what's in that cup for him.

Later in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus pleads with God, "Father, if there is any other way, take this cup from me. Not my will but thine be done." And we know what God's will was. Sure enough, drinking that cup led to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.

And so Jesus asks the disciples, "Can you drink the cup?" And they must not have been listening earlier, because they quickly answer, "Yes Lord, we are able!"

Really? I wonder how often we're like James and John, signing up to follow Jesus without really understanding the implications. Become a Christian? Sounds good! Ask Jesus into my heart? Sure! Go to church, ok I can do that! But following Christ is about so much more! Do you really know what it is you're committing to?

- It's more than coming to church on Sunday
- It's more than meeting with your small group or Sunday School

- And it's definitely more than arguing on Facebook over silly things like red cups at Starbucks

Here's the deal – sometimes I feel like we should make people sign a consent waiver for church membership. You know, like those waivers you sign before skydiving or whitewater rafting. Ours would say: Warning, active participation in the Church of Jesus Christ can and may lead to death. Sign here.

The fact is – Jesus didn't call us to come and sit in church every week. Jesus called us to come and die.

There's obviously no shortage of real problems in the world today. Following Jesus means we are called to service so that there might be hope in the midst of our broken world. I'm not at all trying to downplay the other foundational components we've talked about these past two weeks. Worship is important – in fact, we're made for it. Connecting is important – and we're made for that, too, and can't thrive without it. But there's more. Faith without works is dead. And if we're really going to follow Jesus, we're also called to put our faith into action just like Jesus did. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. And the same is expected from those who bear his name.

Early Christians were known for their work among the diseased and terminally ill. They would show up in villages and towns that had been ravaged by leprosy and later the plague. People thought they were crazy for volunteering to be in the midst of such deadly contagious conditions. But there were the Christians, caring for and providing comfort to people who were dying. Catherine of Siena was one such saint.⁴ She believed that ministering to the terminally ill helped her share in the suffering of Christ, which brought her closer to God. Can you drink that cup?

Early Methodists and other pietists often began their ministry in new communities and settlements by creating hospitals and schools. Again, they were meeting tangible needs through service in Jesus' name, often at their own expense. Can you drink that cup?

Today, just as then, following Jesus and drinking the cup means being willing to enter into the suffering of the world in order that we might experience the joy of God's salvation. Jesus didn't enter glory without first going through suffering. And if we follow him, we'll walk to the same path. We may not be called to literally die. But we might be. Following Jesus certainly doesn't preclude that possibility. There are certainly parts of the world today where Christians are dying for their faith. Could you drink that cup?

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1991/issue30/3011.html>

It seems irresponsible to talk about dying for a cause without addressing the awful tragedy in Paris on Friday. ISIS claimed responsibility for seven attackers wearing suicide vests and using rifles to kill 129 people and injure 352 more, 99 of them critically. But let me tell you the difference between dying for Christ and dying for ISIS or any other cause.

Being willing to die for Jesus should always be about *selflessness* – selflessness that honors, respects, and promotes life. Like when Dr. Kent Brantly, the Samaritan’s Purse doctor, contracted Ebola last year while by caring for Ebola victims in Liberia. By the grace of God, he recovered and survived. But he was willing to die for Jesus *in order that others might live*. That’s the standard for dying for Christ.

Throughout history the Church has certainly failed this standard. The Crusades are the prime example, but we have others today, too. Carrying out violence in Jesus’ name is difficult to reconcile with the Jesus who says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But dying in the service of Jesus *in order that others might have life* – that’s what greatness looks like in God’s kingdom.

Strapping a bomb around yourself and blowing up and gunning down innocent people, like what happened in Paris, that isn't greatness by any standard. That's cowardice. And it's evil. Strapping on a medical kit and running into a diseased village to comfort the dying, like Dr. Brantly or Catherine of Siena, that's real greatness. And strapping a cross to your back and dying on it willingly so that the whole world might live, that's something other-worldly. That's salvation. And that's pretty great, too.

Elsewhere in scripture⁵ Jesus says, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” Martin Luther King Jr. once said the thing he liked about that definition of greatness is that anyone can be great, because anyone can serve.⁶ Isn't that the truth? Anyone can serve. Age doesn't matter, aptitude doesn't matter, education doesn't matter, and affluence doesn't matter. All you need to be great in God's kingdom is the willingness to serve.

I'm continually moved by those of you who volunteer to visit our homebound and nursing home friends. And some of you bring your young children along, too. To folks who don't get out, it means so much to know that someone still cares for them. What a beautiful way to serve. That's greatness.

There's a committee of people in our church dedicated to making our church look beautiful. They're also responsible for making it more fully reflect our God-given vision for BUMC. You may have noticed the construction improvements underway in the chapel. They're building what

⁵ “The greatest among you will be your servant.” Matthew 23:10

⁶ This is from Martin Luther King Jr's sermon “The Drum Major Instinct”

will become our new prayer chapel so that we can better utilize the entire chapel space for gathering, connecting, and worshiping. That's greatness.

This past week our youth participated in a work and service day. There were 47 adults and kids from our church who joined with folks from five other churches to pack 5500 shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child that will be sent to South Sudan. The best part – during their time of worship, five of our kids made life commitments to Christ that morning. Greatness, indeed!

I want to close with a final story about service exemplified. Sam Wotherspoon went to be with the Lord last July at the age of 90. He was a loving husband, father, and grandfather, patriarch of this church, and great friend to many. Sam was a decorated military veteran, having received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart for his service in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. Sam was one of the greatest of The Greatest Generation. We remembered him two weeks ago at our All Saints service as we celebrated the lives of all the faithfully departed. And I frequently remember him when I see my mailbox.

Sam was a member of the Buckaroos, a group of men founded by Buck Robbins, another patron saint of BUMC. The Buckaroos serve here weekly to take care of miscellaneous projects around the church. During one gathering Sam overheard me say I needed a mailbox. He said, "C'mon with me!" and took me straight to Lowe's while he sent Ralph Jacobs home to get the tools we would need. After we picked up our supplies Ralph met us back at my house and the three of us got started taking turns digging the hole for the mailbox. After a couple turns Sam wouldn't let go of the shovel. Ralph and I kept trying to take it back but he wouldn't let us! "It's ok, I've got it" he'd say. It felt wrong sitting there watching an 88 year old man dig a hole I should have been digging, but Sam wouldn't have it any other way! What a great and beautiful example Sam was of Christ's servant heart. May God rest his soul.

Jesus asked his disciples, and he asks us, "Can you drink the cup?" Henri Nouwen once said,⁷ "Living a complete life is drinking our cup until it is empty, trusting that God will fill it with everlasting life." What better way to live our lives for Jesus than to empty ourselves out in service to his name? Friends and followers of Christ, may we all drink our cups, serve our Lord, and live our lives to the full. Amen.

⁷ From "Can You Drink the Cup?" p 93