

To Serve or Not to Serve?
A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Deborah Hart
At Eglinton St. George's United Church
October 18, 2009

Readings: Job 38: 1-7; Mark 10:35-45

Prayer: O God, fill our minds with your light, our hearts with your love and our whole beings with your holy presence, that we might hear your word and respond in loving service. Amen.

I missed last Thanksgiving Sunday with you as I was finishing up a week-long retreat on Stoney Lake at the Viamede Resort, north of Peterborough. Thirty-one of us from Ontario and Quebec, the U.S. and Australia, all of whom do reiki, gathered for a spiritual retreat. I went on my first retreat with this group last fall when I was on sabbatical and had so many wonderful learnings and insights, for myself and my ministry, that I decided to return this fall.

We continued last year's theme, focussing on the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Spanish nun, who takes one on an inner journey to closer union with God. Her book is called *The Interior Castle*. We began each morning with silent meditation, had times of guided meditation, teaching sessions, a day of fasting, an afternoon to walk the labyrinth and a process this time of examining our priorities and what we *think* is of importance in our lives. There are beautiful hiking trails and the colours were at their peak while we were there.

We had been totally immersed in our retreat for almost 6 days, and so you can imagine my surprise when last Saturday morning I heard someone say: "I think that's Deborah Hart." And a woman beckoned me over. It was Angus MacQueen's daughter, Marion McNairn, and her sister Barbara. (For those of you who don't know, Angus was the minister here at St. George's for many years and our Minister Emeritus until his death not many years ago.) Marion and Colin's son was getting married there that afternoon at a gorgeous outdoor setting overlooking the lake. It's a small world sometimes...

One of Teresa of Avila's favourite topics is what she calls "reptiles". On one's spiritual journey to the castle and even into its outer chambers one is warned about encountering reptiles: those distractions and temptations that will try to thwart your journey or get you off-track. I think today's Gospel reading is a good illustration of that. The disciples have been on quite a journey with Jesus to date. They have heard him teach, watched him heal, puzzled over parables, traveled to different regions by land and sea, marvelled at miracles, witnessed the transfiguration and heard Jesus predict three times that he would be betrayed, suffer, die and rise again. They are on the final leg of the journey from Galilee and are at Jericho, about to make the long difficult climb up to Jerusalem, heading into Holy Week.

You'd think the disciples would have got all the teachings and messages they needed and were ready to graduate and be the leaders of this new movement once Jesus was gone. Instead next Sunday's reading will be about the healing of a blind person, a story that completes a whole section of Mark's Gospel that shows that those on the outside who have been blind now see, but the disciples and even the inner circle of Peter, James and John, grow more blind the longer they are in Jesus' company. These disciples, try as they might, just don't get the complete picture.

Jesus has explained three times that his way is not their way or the world's way. After the first prediction, Peter denies him. After the second prediction, the disciples argue about who is the greatest, and Jesus places a child in their midst. Today, the brothers, James and John, ask to be seated in the most important places of honour, on Jesus' right and left when he comes into his glory. The desire for power and prestige is a reptile that pounces on all of us would-be disciples somewhere along the journey.

Especially in the days of Christendom, when the Christian faith was synonymous with our culture, we tied in success with faithfulness, we thought that going to church was a place to be seen and recognized as “good people”. If you went to church, didn't that mean that your life was supposed to be easier or better? Unfortunately *Jesus* never promised that, although several *churches* have tried to propose it in order to get new converts! We admit that we've heard that message about the one who wants to be great must be servant, and the one who wants to be first must be slave of all, but we don't like it very much or live it very well. The reptiles keep tempting us towards a false image of success and trying to equate it with faithfulness.

Part of the program on the retreat is to take two days to be matched with a partner for something called “Pink dot, green dot”. Everyone draws a dot with a number on it out of a box to find their partner. If you get the pink dot, then your role is to serve your green dot partner for the whole day. You help them on with their coat, carry their stuff, get their meals, offer to do reiki for them, and most importantly you are to help them work on the goal that they have set for themselves for the week. You help them clarify the dream God has for them and plot out how they will move towards it. You look for the reptiles and other ways they might sabotage the achieving of that goal, and help them remove those roadblocks. And you watch their passion blossom for their dream as they see that it is within their grasp.

Now as you can imagine, there are some of us who just love to be the pink dots, the givers, to serve others and be in that role; and there are others of us who find it very difficult to be the green dots, to receive and allow another person to serve us. Then there are the ones who love to be pampered and like being the centre of attention, and others who find that role the most difficult, not wanting to be totally self-indulgent, even if it is in a good way. What's hardest often is to give up control and trust another person to meet our needs! Each person gets a day to be the pink dot and a day to be the green dot. As you might guess, we learn a great deal about ourselves in those two days! Think for a moment about what it would be like for you in these two roles. Which is your preferred one? Which one do you need to learn to do better?

The instructions given to the green dots, the receivers, were to go deep and to observe themselves as if under a microscope, and not to be distracted by things. Let their partner take care of those things, focus on better understanding yourself and God's dreams and desires for you; because the more you understand that for yourself, the more you can then help others. Instructions for the pink dots included the need to be discerning, perceptive, caring and loving in our service, and to not get distracted ourselves or we would distract our partners. We were asked to do our own work as well, so that we could be at our highest or deepest level in order to help others go there too.

Sometimes I think we misunderstand the role of servant or service to which we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are not looking for the “suffering servant” as in “poor me, the martyr”, but rather one who does that role gracefully and in loving surrender. I'm as guilty of this martyr tendency as many of you are. For instance when asked how I was doing this past week, I caught myself launching into a litany of: “Oh I have a funeral on Thursday, a wedding on Friday, several people are ill or in hospital and I have a sermon and 3 baptisms to prepare for plus serving coffee to the people lining up at the Rummage Sale.” I might as well have said “Poor me”. But what I learned on my retreat is that that is like struggling upstream in life, and we need to go “downstream”. So what I really meant to say and really believe...is: “How very fortunate I am that in ministry I get to share the most important times in your lives – the joys and the sorrows, the challenges and the celebrations, that you grant me the privilege of being invited into those meaningful times in your lives. *That's* the kind of servant I want to be, one willing to walk those various paths with you in faith and in love.

I don't think God really wants miserable, complaining servants! Yesterday's Rummage Sale and the week of set-up is such a beautiful example of serving others in a variety of ways. It is *not* a glamorous job. One encounters as much dust and dirt and junk as treasures and delights. But the sale meets the needs of us and our neighbours, as well as those with little cash to spare in today's economy. It helps people stretch their dollars to clothe their children and themselves, find gifts for birthdays and Christmas, household goods to make meals and linens to cover beds, and it helps us all to practice the art of recycling. So many of the "leftovers" went to agencies in and around the city for the homeless, women's shelters, children's programs, and on and on. Santi, our bookkeeper, even got bags of things to send to friends in the Philippines who lost their homes and goods in the floods a few weeks ago.

And for the countless numbers of people who volunteered all week? Well there were at least two options to approaching it. You could complain about all the hours of back-breaking sacrifice you made for the sake of your church to help make money to keep our doors open – or you could see it as the amazing opportunity you had to follow Jesus' example of serving "the least of these", a chance to be a real disciple who gets what Jesus was all about. Not sitting on either side of the throne of glory but being right in the midst of God's people in loving service. One is the upstream martyr approach that isn't very much fun. The other is the graceful downstream view of surrendering our egos and needs to the greater mission, the bigger picture of life and loving service. In our hearts we know so well that we've been at both ends of the spectrum and are at various points on the continuum, depending on our mood and the cause we're supporting on any given day.

Bruce Sanguin, the minister who is coming from Vancouver to be with us for 5 days next month, in his book *The Emerging Church*, talks about doing things because we think we *should* as compared with doing them because we have been given the Spirit's gifts or calling to do them. He says the work may get done just the same but can be with a different attitude or approach. He asks "Why would we want people in the kitchen for coffee hour who'd rather be just about anywhere else?" We're called to see our own and each other's Spirit-given gifts and encourage one another to step up to the plate and use them in service. Bruce writes: "We are called to get off the way, to die to our egos so that our most authentic self ... may creatively manifest. What we want is to get people lighting up and giving back from *within*. When people are serving from the place of Spirit, they manifest a different quality of service characterized by joy and authenticity."

Jesus doesn't see service as a burden. He isn't pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne. He is a servant through and through. The good seats are not his to give and he doesn't have one for himself. He is not in it for reward, but instead for the love of God, that promises him nothing but the opportunity to give himself away. Jesus turned the world upside down on purpose. It's not our job to straighten and order it according to this world's priorities, but rather to see it his way, the way that ultimately leads to life at its fullest and most meaningful.

Today we welcome Daria, Isabella and Georgia into this topsy-turvy life of service to which we are all called, a life of giving and receiving, not from a needy, resentful place of sacrificial martyrdom but of serving as part of our Christian calling from a deep and rooted place of graceful self-surrender and joyful, genuine love. Beware of the reptiles that will try to lead us off-track, support each other on the spiritual journey, and go downstream with the flow, trusting the one who beckons: "Follow me." Amen.