

The Servant Church

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 6, 2019

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We all love the church, our church and the worldwide church. In our love for it, we want to see it be successful. We want it to increase in membership, be recognized for its accomplishments, and do well financially. We want to keep everything going so we can continue all the traditions and customs that we enjoy.

While we love the church, the desire to see it be successful is misguided. That is because the mission of the church isn't to be successful (at least according to human standards), but to be a servant. The church doesn't exist for its own sake, but exists so that it can be of service both to God and to humanity. As a servant church, our primary concern isn't our own growth, success, or recognition, but on how we can serve God and the advancement of the human family in the time and place we are in. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that the church exists in order to die. After all, that is what Jesus, our founder, did. It is by dying that we give life to the world and then somehow experience new resurrections to keep going.

In our Gospel from *Luke*, Jesus talks about what it means to be a servant. Even though it may contain negative connotations today, a servant is expected to look out for someone else before himself or herself. As Jesus says in this passage, when coming in from the field, a master doesn't say to the servant, "come here immediately and take your place at table." Instead, the master expects the servant to serve them first. Only then may the servant eat and drink.

As a servant church, we cannot take care of ourselves first, eating and drinking, and then get around to helping others later. We start with others, including those beyond our nation, race, and religion: finding their needs, acknowledging their suffering, and tackling the social evils that prevent them from being fully human. Before we get too comfortable here, we need to challenge ourselves out there. Only after doing that can we then serve and help ourselves.

The Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was ultimately killed for trying to make Christianity speak to the social evils of the 20th century, saw no need for a church that was primarily concerned with itself. Unless the church got involved in the wider issues of humanity, it was pointless. It would not be giving life to the world. As he wrote less than a year before his execution: “The church is church only when it is there for others...The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community- not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling what a life with Christ is, what it means ‘to be there for others.’” (*Outline for a Book*, August 3, 1944)

The church is a servant that doesn't look for success, but looks out for the world before itself.

Who are the others in the world that we as a church are for?

As a church, we don't need success. All we need are mustard seeds. Mustard seeds of true faith will do more for the advancement of the world than a triumphalist church only concerned with itself. May we take the lower place, put others first, engage in humanitarian issues, see Christ in every human being, deflect attention and recognition, and at the end of the day simply say, ‘we are but unprofitable servants; we have merely done what we were obliged to do.’