

“Mother Teresa”

*Matthew 25:31–46; Mark 10:42–45;
James 2:14–17*

One more disciple -- a symbol of selfless service, from our time.

We conclude our series, *More Than the Twelve*, with a look at one of the best-known disciples of my lifetime, Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity. Though she had her critics, Mother Teresa’s service to the poor in India is known to nearly all. She built her life around actually living out Jesus’ teachings in the parable of the sheep and goats (above). She heard the challenge from James to do, not merely profess (also above). Here is a brief bio:



Teresa, Blessed Mother (1910–97), nun and founder of the Missionaries of Charity. Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born in Skopje, Macedonia, of Albanian parents. Early attracted to work in India, in 1928 she joined the Sisters of Loretto at Rathfarnham in Ireland and was sent to Darjeeling to begin her novitiate; she took the name of Teresa (of Lisieux). In 1929 she went to Calcutta to teach in St Mary’s, a school of her Order which catered for the well-to-do. She felt herself drawn towards the very poor, and in 1948 she was given permission to leave her Order. Dressed in a blue-edged sari, she went to live in the slums of Calcutta, teaching the children of the poor and caring for the destitute and hopeless. Others joined her and in 1950 her new Order, the Missionaries of Charity (Sisters), was approved. Its foundation was followed in 1963 by that of the Missionary Brothers of Charity and in 1969 by that of the International Co-Workers of Mother Teresa. Their activities, which are now world-wide, embrace the care of all manner of deprived and diseased people and victims of hatred and neglect. Mother Teresa’s selfless love and devotion (esp. to the dying) caught the imagination of the world and she received many honors, among them the Nobel Peace Prize for 1979. She was beatified in 2003. Feast day, 5 Sept. ¹

Mother Teresa founded world-wide orders that serve the poor today. She was a leader among disciples, a servant-leader. I can remember when “servant leader” was the management slogan of the day. It generated countless books, conferences, and consultants. We were supposed to turn the organization chart upside down or do away with it altogether. We were told that CEOs were there to serve not to be served. Collaboration, trust, and empathy were the goals. I’m sure that some organizations were helped by the proponents of the servant leadership perspective.

Yet, I’m equally sure that such notions were usually undone by the realities of most corporate life: power is to be taken and used, privilege has its prerogatives, and so on. In the corporate career “tournament,” servant leadership was usually seen as the luxury of those who had already made it to the top.

Jesus understood well how the world worked, then as now. Rulers of all types lord it over their “subjects” he said. The weak are pushed aside and left behind. The visible hand of management too often becomes the iron fist of tyranny. Ask yourself, how many Americans would describe their bosses as servant leaders? Would you?

Yet, in today’s passage from Mark, Jesus leads his own disciples towards servanthood. They aren’t to live as the world lives. Instead, whoever among them aspires to greatness in the family of Christ must be the servant of everyone. The organization chart is to be turned upside down and left that way. And as the exemplar of a

¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2005, p. 1600.

servant leader, Jesus will give his own life in service to his disciples and to all humankind, he will be “a ransom for many.”

Servant?

The Greek word used in Mark 10:45 is *diakonēsai*, translated “serve.” In a standard Greek/English NT dictionary, its meaning is “serve, wait on; care for, see after, provide for.” *Diakonēō* (the root) is distinct from the Greek words *douleúō* (to serve as a slave), *therapeúō* (to serve willingly), *latreúō* (to serve for wages), and *leitourgéō* (to do public service). The word, *diakonēō* distinctly refers to a personal service.² Jesus demonstrated this service when he washed the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. They were aghast of course. Slaves were to wash feet, not the Lord!

But it is this personal service that James (the half-brother of Jesus) focuses on in the NT letter bearing his name. After Jesus’ own costly and personal service, James writes, how could disciples possibly claim to have faith in Jesus and yet fail to serve those in need? Hungry people need food, not just encouragement. Freezing people need a coat, not merely a warm hug. As James pointedly notes, our faith will be demonstrated by what we do, far more so than by what we say. Echoing Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, James insists that professions of faith will be seen in actions, and if they are not, then the faith is absent. The true disciple is the one who hears and *does* (Matthew 7:24-29).

Faith and deeds

Many Christians have tried to drive a wedge between our faith and our deeds, as if admitting that God expects us to actually love God and love neighbor in all that we do somehow diminishes the truth that our salvation is by the grace of God and grace alone. Martin Luther, for example, actually wanted to rip the book of James out of the New Testament, calling it “a letter of straw.” He read James to be claiming that we might somehow make ourselves acceptable to God rather than rely only on our faith in Jesus.

But Luther was wrong. The old hymn, “Trust and Obey,” gets it right. There is no space between faith and deeds, between our trust in Jesus and our living. It is an “and” not an “or.” As Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, those who have faith in Jesus Christ have been indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit and will, necessarily, bear the fruit of God’s Spirit (see Gal. 5).

As Jesus served us all, the “ransom for many,” so Jesus’ disciples serve others. It is simply what disciples do. The holy habit we need to form is listening to the call of our hearts to serve. We can try to tune it out, but the insistent call to serve will be there, urging us to live out the discipleship we claim.

A Servant’s Service

Jesus calls us to be “servants of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn’t it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the “big” project or “big” deal; true service doesn’t discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God’s approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service “delights” in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not! Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community. The New Testament witness reminds us time and again that we are called to be servants of God, servants called to build up the covenant community in which we live and to be a witness to those who live outside the covenant.

² From the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Kittel, abridged by G. Bromiley.

When we join the United Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but *how*. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or doing mission work, or working on the Bazaar . . . there is no end to the opportunities. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.” We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

The Servant People of God

An enduring biblical image of God’s people is the servant people of God. In the Old Testament, God saves the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt so that they might serve him. (Exodus 8:1, 9:1, 10:3). Job is a servant of God (1:8, 42:8). Israel is the servant of God, whom God has saved (Isaiah 41:8, 48:20). This image of God’s servant people is further developed in the New Testament and, like so much of Jesus’ teachings and actions, is taken to levels that can almost make our heads spin!

Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News is a proclamation that he is Lord, and the Jews of his day would have heard this to be the claim of a master who is to be served. But . . . when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, the disciples fell to arguing about who would sit at Jesus’ side. Jesus tells them that they don’t really know what they are asking for . . . whoever wishes to be first among them must be the servant of them all! Perhaps most remarkably, Jesus said that he had come “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (see Matt 20:20-38, Mark 10:32-45, and Luke 22:24-27).

Just in case his disciples didn’t get it (as they usually didn’t!), Jesus drove home the importance of servanthood on the night of the last supper. Jesus gathered his disciples together to share the Passover supper, only to find that they were again arguing about which of them was the greatest. They would have been seated on couches set beside a low table, with their bodies toward the table and their feet dangling off the back of the couch. Because the roads and streets were so dusty, it was customary for the host to provide water for the washing of feet. But the actual washing was a very servile task to be done by a servant, slave, or perhaps submissive women or children, never by the men themselves. You can imagine all the disciples lying around waiting to see who would come in to wash their feet. Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He rose, removed his outer robe, and began washing the feet of the disciples. Peter couldn’t believe what he is seeing! When Jesus was finished (you can picture the disciples sitting open-mouthed!), he told them that he had done this as an example to them, that they should do as he had done. He washed their feet, and they ought to wash each other’s feet. Jesus had lived out his teachings on servanthood right before their eyes, abolishing all notions of any pecking-order in the people of God.