

“Humble Servant” GPPC 1-12-20
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

If you’ve ever had occasion to enter her office and my office, you may notice that our Christian Educator, Kim Row, and I are apparently in an unspoken competition to see who can have the messiest office. I think for sheer *office* messiness, Kim is probably the champion. Her office is not large to begin with. And when she is in the middle of some project involving children and youth, stuff is liable to be stacked several feet high. But I suspect if we’re going strictly for *desk* messiness, I may beat her out by a paperclip.

One thing messy, interesting, and educational about Kim’s office is the outside of her door and her bulletin board beside it. Unlike my door which doesn’t change very often, Kim has frequent new photos, pictures, and sayings. This week she has a saying on her door. “Service, not service us.”

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Isaiah and Matthew have something to say about this as well.

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Speaking through the Prophet Isaiah, God says, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed.”

What do we notice about this servant whom God upholds? We notice that God delights in him. God’s spirit is upon him. He is aligned with God and God’s will.

We notice also that he will bring forth justice to the nations. This servant from God will make sure that *all* people, not just some people, all people will be treated with fairness, with dignity, with equality, with justice.

And this servant will act in a particular way. As one divinity school professor said a few years ago, “...the prophet offers a portrait of the kind of leadership we should expect from one called by God: patient, nonviolent, merciful...Isaiah’s portrait of God’s Servant provides a genuine—even startling—contrast to contemporary models of leadership

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that leave a legacy of preemptive wars, secret (and not-so-secret) prisons, and torture as a form of interrogation.” (Stephanie A. Paulsell in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, 218.)

This servant will be patient, nonviolent, merciful. And this servant will be relentless. “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...”

But who is this mysterious servant?

Scholars do not know for certain. The servant may be the entire people of Israel—God’s servant people. The New Testament writers believe the servant may also be Jesus. And, as we shall see, there may also be other servants.

Matthew tells about the baptism of Jesus. Jesus travels from Galilee to John at the Jordan River in order to be baptized by John. And, as you may have heard before, John and Jesus have this odd first encounter that always reminds me of one of those movie or TV comedies when two people are walking together beside each other and approaching a door and one person says to the other, “After you.” “No, after you.” “Oh, no. After you.”

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John says, “I need to be baptized by *you*, Jesus. You don’t need to be baptized by me.” And Jesus says, “No. You need to baptize me. In order to ‘fulfill all righteousness.’” In other words, I need to be baptized by you in order to do God’s will. It’s an odd scene, isn’t it?

You may remember that baptism signifies the washing away of sin. Yet many of the New Testament writers affirm that Jesus was sinless. So what is he doing getting baptized by John?

There are various ways of interpreting what happens, but one way of interpreting is to see the baptism of Jesus as his being in solidarity with sinners. In humility, Jesus, the servant of God submits to baptism by John who is the student, not the teacher, the disciple, not the Messiah. In humility, Jesus submits to baptism.

But humility is hard for us sometimes, isn’t it?

Many years ago, when I was in high school and bell bottom pants were cool, and various disco artists roamed the earth and exercised dominion upon the music world, I took some French horn lessons from a guy who played in the Charlotte Symphony. Now, Charlotte was not the New York Philharmonic or the Boston Symphony. But it was still a

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major symphony orchestra with major league musicians playing in it and world class musicians coming to play solos with it. (I recall going to hear one of the great violinists of all time, Itzhak Perlman, perform with the Charlotte Symphony.) At any rate, for a while, several members of the Charlotte Symphony would drive down to our high school in South Carolina and give private lessons for a fee. I was fortunate enough to study with one of those musicians for a while, and, no doubt, with such fine instruction and my boundless talent, I was certain I would one day be playing in a major symphony orchestra myself. In fact, I recall telling my mom, dad, and sister this at dinner one night, and even mentioning that I would probably be better than my teacher in the symphony in just a few short years. After all, he wasn't first chair; he was fourth. And as I stand before you, you see how this worked out.

Humility is a challenge for us Christians. God and the Bible tell us again and again that each of us is unique and precious beyond words. We are provided by God with amazing gifts. This is all true, thank God.

But we have a tendency to go too far in our thinking. Elected representatives begin to think they are tyrants instead of public servants.

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Christians become overconfident about their knowledge of the church, God, and the Bible. Worship and stewardship become something we give to God if it suits us, instead of fulfilling our great privilege and our clear calling. As the apostle Paul warned, “I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” (Romans 12:3) Let us think of ourselves with sober judgment, because our lack of humility is destructive to community, and it stunts our personal growth as Christians.

A spiritual writer says, “Over and over again, we lock God out. We cover our ears. We blind ourselves to the divine transformational opportunities that stand before us. I know at least that time and time again I pray for God to touch my life, to mend the brokenness within me, to be unambiguously present in my experience—and I think that I mean it deeply, genuinely. But then—simultaneously—I so insist on my own way, so want miracles on my own terms, that I effectively remove myself from what might be my own rebirth.” (Deborah Smith Douglas in *Weavings*, Sept./Oct. 1995, 20.)

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And this is why the baptism of Jesus and our own baptisms are so instructive and powerful. The Lord Jesus chooses in humility to be baptized by John and to be in solidarity with us sinners. And as Jesus comes up from the muddy water of the Jordan River, God's voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This is a reference to Psalm 2:7 God's "beloved Son," and Isaiah 42:1 God's servant. God says *this* is who Jesus is.

And as followers of Jesus, this is also who we are—beloved children of God and humble servants of God. The pattern for our lives is set in the baptism of Jesus and in our own baptism. Our lives are not meant to be a miserable, competitive "rat race." As somebody said, "Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat."

Instead, we are meant to be humble servants of God relentlessly ministering for the justice and mercy of God for all people. This is the richest, most satisfying life possible this side of heaven. Humbly doing what we can with what we have to help bring God's justice and mercy to all people. How we do that will change depending on our age, abilities, and money. But we can do it all our lives.

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How is God calling you and me to know the joy of this calling in the New Year? What is something you and I can say and do, pray and give toward to be about God's justice and mercy as humble servants? Let me know if I can help get your connected with a ministry here or somewhere else.

Kim's door is right, you know. "Service, not service us. Service not service us." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal