

**Psalm 146** Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

<sup>2</sup> I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

<sup>3</sup> Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

<sup>4</sup> When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

<sup>5</sup> Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,

<sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

<sup>7</sup> who executes justice for the oppressed; & gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free; <sup>8</sup> the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.

<sup>9</sup> The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

<sup>10</sup> The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

**Mark 10:32-45** <sup>32</sup>They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup>saying, "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; <sup>34</sup>they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." <sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" <sup>39</sup>They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." <sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Psalm 146 and Mark 10:32-45

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"The Servant Leader"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Perhaps you remember Annie Oakley and Frank Butler's famous contest:

*Anything you can do, I can do better. I can do anything better than you.*

*No, you can't. Yes, I can. No, you can't. Yes, I can.*

*No, you can't. Yes, I can, Yes, I can!*

*Anything you can be, I can be greater. Sooner or later, I'm greater than you.*

*No, you're not. Yes, I am. No, you're not. Yes, I am.*

*No, you're NOT! Yes, I am. Yes, I am!*

[from *Annie Get Your Gun*, music and lyrics by Irving Berlin]

You gotta love Annie Oakley and Frank Butler. And you have to laugh at their transparent haughtiness towards each other. They both want to sit at the head of the table and to be the star of the show. They say that art imitates life. They say it has something to teach. I wonder what Jesus would say to Annie Oakley and Frank Butler. Might he say the same thing he said to his disciples?

Whoever wishes to be great must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all. I came to serve, and to give my life. Imitate that.

“And it is high time the disciples start imitating their leader. It is now five days before Jesus' crucifixion. Four days before his betrayal and trial. One day before the clearing of the temple. A few hours before the Triumphal Entry. If the Disciples are going to start appropriating Jesus' teachings in their life it ought to be now. But here they are, moments before the most crucial events in their life, and they are a bickering, petty, bad-tempered quarrelsome lot. We need to learn from this not-so-flattering moment in the life of the disciples. Why is it that at critical moments, when the opportunity to truly be of service to the Kingdom is so close at hand, we are off wondering what's in it for me? [from “The Three Poison Pills of Position, Prestige, and Power” by Brett C. Blair, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Now, as I said, we need to learn from this not-so-flattering moment, but before we do that, let's set the scene. Please notice that when James and John come to Jesus with this request, Jesus does not get angry with them. A few weeks back, we had a lesson where the disciples couldn't cast out a demon, and Jesus gets mad. “How much longer must I endure you? How much longer must I put up with this perverse and faithless generation? Bring him to me.” Grrr. He was frustrated, ready to pull his hair out. But that doesn't appear to be the case here. James and John have a completely absurd request—totally misguided, selfish, arrogant. But Jesus looks at them, perhaps places a gentle hand on each shoulder and says, “You do not know what you are asking.” Now why the difference? Was Jesus just having a bad day before? I don't think so. I think William Barclay has hit on the truth. Listen to what he writes:

“There are many negative things that can be said about James and John. They were nakedly ambitious and proud: they wanted, and believed they deserved, places of honor in Jesus' kingdom. They were ignorant and insensitive: their request for places of honor came right after Jesus had told of His coming suffering and death. But there's one positive thing you can say about James and John: they believed in Jesus. Here was a poor, homeless, persecuted carpenter and yet James and John believed Jesus was a king. They believed that He would conquer the power structure of Rome.” Even their crude ambition reflected their faith in Christ. [from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 254, 255; in illustrations on Mark 10:34-45, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Jesus must sense that. These two guys really, truly think that Jesus has the power to grant this request. Hidden in their insensitivity and ignorance, there is a compelling affirmation that *something* is getting thru. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They say “We are able!” But of course, they're not—at least, not right away. When Jesus is arrested just a few days after this, every one of his disciples desert and deny him. “Yet tradition tells us that James was the first apostle to be martyred and John was the last to die after enduring years of exile, pain, and persecution.” [from “Be Careful What You Ask For” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

So what is the problem? While Jesus isn't fuming with anger, we get a sense that he's not thrilled with this request. Is it this crude ambition that bothers him? I don't think so. “Christ has no problem with people who are ambitious. God created us to dream, to aspire, to strive for the best.” [from “Your Dreams are Too Small” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] You might be interested to learn that the antonym of ambition is apathy. Apathy is complete and total indifference—a ‘who cares’ attitude, lethargic blindness to needs around us. A person with ambition does care—he or she feels a personal stake in the outcome of events. Jesus wants us to be ambitious—for ourselves, for our community, for our church, for our world, for Him. Ambition itself is not listed as a sin in scripture—not anywhere. Some of the things that can drive misguided ambition—such as greed, lust, craving for power—these kinds of things are, of course, sin. But *not* ambition, in and of itself. We should want to be our best, do our best, give our best. Anything less is to squander the gifts God has given us.

So ambition, in and of itself, isn't the problem. Nor is the problem one that plagues James and John alone. Just because Mark reports that “When the (other) 10 heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John” doesn't mean we can take that at face value. It's far more likely that they were indignant because they had their eyes on those same seats, themselves. All of them have ambitions. They all want

to be great. They all want to be special. They all want to feel important. What they don't immediately realize is: they already are. They're his friends, his inner circle, his plan for carrying the message out beyond his death. But like all of us, they lose their focus. The good news here is that Jesus will use them in spite of selfishness, arrogance, or misguided notions.

Jesus seizes on this as a teaching moment: If you want to know the joy and the power and the glory of the Kingdom right now on earth—if you want to be in my inner circle now, then get your mind off distractions of the world around you and stay focused on me—do what I do! Servant leadership. Just as they did, we today grapple with what that means for our lives. So here is where we learn from this not-so-flattering moment in the lives of the disciples. Like them, we must learn to incorporate the 3 Ss of Servant leadership into our lives: Surrender, Service, Sacrifice.

If we are ambitious for the Kingdom of God; if we want to be great in the eyes of God, then we must become the servant—just as Christ did. In order to become a servant, we must surrender anything that holds us back. James and John had to surrender their vision of the Kingdom, their desire for prestige and power. Only then could they serve. You and I have to do that as well.

Whenever I think about servanthood, I still think back on an early episode from *Downton Abbey*, which I know will nauseate some of you, but hear me out. Very early on in the series, Matthew Crawley comes to Downton as the named heir of the estate, even though he's the third cousin twice removed or something like that. He comes so that the Earl can train him in all the duties of his eventual inheritance. But Matthew is resistant. He doesn't want to be upper crust. He doesn't want to become a snob. He doesn't want all these servants. He is assigned a Valet—one Mr. Mosely—but Matthew won't let him do anything because he wants to maintain his own independence. At one point, he says to the earl, "would you be offended if I dispense with services of Mr. Mosely?"

"Why?" asks the earl. "Has he displeased you, or done something wrong?"

"Not at all," says Matthew, "he's just unnecessary. I can do for myself."

The earl is somewhat shrewd in that moment, and offers interesting wisdom. "Look," he says. "You have gone to school, studied the law, come here, all because you want to be of use to society. Mr. Mosely is the same as you—he wants to be of use. Not only is this his livelihood, but it is what gives him meaning and purpose. It's true that there's nothing he can do that you can't do for yourself, but there are things that only you can do as the heir of Downton. He serves so that you can serve. We all have a part to play. And we all depend on each other."

Matthew does rethink things, and discovers a certain satisfaction when he sees how much Mr. Mosely wants to be in service. That day, Matthew surrenders some of his more blatant prejudices about the social order in which he suddenly finds himself.

We, too, sometimes must surrender certain thoughts, ideas, prejudices. But you and I have a deeper problem, and it's serious. See, you and I—we would never go up to Jesus and ask to sit on his right or his left. Why? Well, it's not because we're aware of how inappropriate it is, I guarantee you that much. To put it bluntly, you and I would never have the audacity to ask such a question because most of us don't really think Jesus has the power to grant it! Yeah, you heard me right. The mainstream church in America has become a generally spineless, pathetic, timid thing. We don't have power because either we don't ask for it, or, when we do ask for it, we don't expect anything much. We can change that, and we need to.

Servanthood starts with surrender. Surrender anything that gets in the way of serving God. Surrender prejudice. Surrender the impulse to ask 'What's in it for me?' Surrender the anxiety. Surrender the limited, small-time dreams. Surrender any notion that successful service to God is measured in numbers or dollars. Surrender and place yourself wholly under God's direction.

Once we have surrendered the things that hold us back, we are available to God for Service. That's the second S. To serve is to give of ourselves. And service is the name of the game, my friends. Service is where we put flesh on our faith. And in turn, in service, we find our faith ever being tested and strengthened and deepened. Service is the lifeblood of Christian faith.

*The Soloist* is a powerful movie that came out in 2009. It's one of those films that challenges us to really think about the problem of homelessness and mental illness, but its also one that leaves us with a sense of hope, redemption, and a beautiful example of servanthood.

"The movie stars Robert Downey Jr. as *Los Angeles Times* journalist Steve Lopez, and it's based on Lopez's real-life experiences. As the movie opens, Lopez's life is a wreck. He drinks too much. His marriage is over and he is estranged from his son. Then he stumbles across a homeless man Nathaniel Ayers, played by Jamie Foxx. Ayers is on the street playing beautiful music on a cello with only two strings. Lopez discovers that Nathaniel is a gifted man. He had been a cello student at New York's Juilliard School, but his studies were cut short by a battle with schizophrenia. Lopez gets Ayers settled in the Lamp Community, a homeless shelter on LA's skid row. It is a difficult transition for Ayers to leave the streets. The extent of his psychological problems is painfully obvious.

"At first, Lopez sees Ayers only as material for his column in the *Times*. However, as he moves into this homeless man's world, they develop a friendship that transcends that of journalist and subject. What is most interesting is the change that takes place in Steve Lopez's life as he tries to relate to Nathaniel. He starts getting his own life together. He begins to understand the importance of relationships and of commitment to others. He begins to find meaning in looking beyond the end of his own nose. In helping Nathaniel Ayers, Steve Lopez discovers the truth to Jesus' words: whoever wants to become great must first be a servant. [3 ¶s from "Good News about Ambition" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

The same is true for us. It is in serving that we find meaning. It is in giving of ourselves that we gain our true self. Service is one way we model our lives on Christ's life, for, as Jesus reminds us, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

Surrender what holds us back. Serve—give of ourselves—in any way we can. But of course, real Christian service goes beyond giving of ourselves. Sometimes it involves giving up ourselves entirely. Sometimes it involves sacrifice. Now all forms of service involve some degree of sacrifice—a little bit of time, some energy, even modest financial gifts.

But if we stop when the tab gets too costly, we may be in trouble. We are like the old story of the pig and the chicken who were walking down the road, when they saw a sign advertising ham and eggs for breakfast. "Let's go and have some breakfast," said the chicken. "Oh no," replied the pig, "for you that is only a token offering, but for me it would mean total commitment!" And we shy away from total commitment.

There is an old saying, often used as a banner slogan, which says that we should "Expect great things from God. Dare great things for God." [from "Are We Able?" by Donald B. Strobe, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] If we have trouble expecting God to do truly great things, how can we possibly dare anything great? Total commitment, real sacrifice can only happen if we have trusted God so deeply that we have surrendered everything to him and are ready to let him use us. That is where true greatness is found.

"...Bob Pierce knew how to find true greatness. He knew he was dying, and he wanted to see an old friend, Borneo Bob Williams, a missionary in Indonesia. When Pierce arrived at Borneo Bob's mission, he noticed a girl lying on a bamboo mat, and he asked his friend about her. Borneo Bob explained that the girl was dying and probably had only a few days left to live. "How come this girl is living down there in the mud when she could be up there in that nice, clean clinic?" Pierce asked angrily.

"Borneo Bob explained that the girl was a jungle girl who had asked to be near the river that day because it was cooler. A great sense of sadness and pity filled Bob Pierce's heart. He knelt beside the girl, held her hand, and began rubbing her forehead tenderly. Then he prayed for her. The girl said something to him which someone nearby translated. She was telling him of her tremendous pain and how she was unable to sleep because of it. "If I could only sleep again," she told him. "If I could only sleep again!" This was more than Pierce could stand. He began crying for the girl, knowing what it was like not being able to sleep, since he experienced the same problem with his illness. Pierce reached into his

pocket and handed his only bottle of sleeping pills to Borneo Bob. "You make sure she gets a good night's sleep from now on," he said to his friend. Pierce knew that it would be at least 10 days before he could get to Singapore to refill his prescription. He knew that he would have to forfeit ten nights of sleep to help this girl, but he obviously felt that it was worth it." [from Billy Graham, *Hope For The Troubled Heart*, (Minneapolis, MN: Grason, 1991), pp. 189-190; as quoted from "Sons and Daughters of Thunder" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Bob Pierce was dying, but he was ready to sacrifice—to spend his last time on earth with his lifelong friend in a state of sleep-deprivation and physical pain.

Surrender. Service. Sacrifice. These are the dynamic, inter-playing components of Servanthood. They are difficult. They are weighty. They demand total commitment. Without any one of them, our witness loses potency.

We are called to servant leadership in our community. Our name is First United Methodist Church of Saginaw. But our mission as servant leaders is to be last:

- Last to let another grieve alone.
- Last to write off the children whose parents have failed them or cast them away.
- Last to ignore the homeless spending each night on a different friends' couch or in their car.
- Last to allow hunger to gnaw at the bellies of our neighbors.
- Last to shrug our shoulders at ongoing environment degradation.
- Last to stay silent in the face of injustice or abuse
- Last to let despair grind down the powerless.
- Last to condone cruelty of any kind, to any living thing.
- Last to let human hatred triumph over divine love.

[9 points from "Operation Omega" by Leonard Sweet, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

May the Lord make it so. Amen.

