

## **Sermon: As One Who Serves**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, April 10, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a minor revolt taking place at Daisy's workplace. She works as an online interpreter, between the two languages of English and Mandarin. The company she works for connects her to various institutions, organization and companies that are in need of help to communicate with their customers who are limited in English, many from China. Whenever the service of an interpreter is needed, she would normally be required first to read out a pre-scripted introduction, explaining her role, notifying that the call is recorded for quality assurance etc. etc. Recently, her company has added one extra line during the introduction: 'I am proud to serve you'.

Daisy explains to me that many of her online colleagues are up-in-arm about this additional line. At first, the objection seems to be focusing on the total length of the introduction, and it has become a bit wordy. As complaints mount, and the management wouldn't budge, the tone and the substance of those complaints shifted. Her colleagues are now voicing their displeasures about the imperial attitude of that additional line: 'I am proud to serve you'. About how degrading it is to be equated as servants, how misogynistic it would be since many of the interpreters are in fact women. That one simple phrase 'I am proud to serve you' seems to have brought out some awful ugliness in many.

Daisy reflected that all her years of serving, alongside me, in congregational ministry have really shaped her, in making her proud to be like a servant, in the likeness of Jesus Christ. She also reflected on how different the worldly value is to that of the Christian faith. For followers of Jesus, to be able to serve is indeed a badge of honour.

Of course, that was not always the case. Disciples of Jesus did not get it at first, or second, or third. In today's reading of Gospel of Luke chapter 22, a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. This is not the first time that disciples had similar kinds of dispute. However, as the hour drew near, and Jesus seemed to be on a collision course with destiny, he broke bread and shared cup with them. He spoke words, words later institutionalized as part of the Christian

liturgy when the community of faith observes the Holy Communion: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.”

It was in the context of that last meal, as the disciples had sensed, correctly as it turned out that the *kairos*, the appointed hour was near. What they had conveniently overlooked, perhaps forgotten, was the suffering that Jesus had predicted he would face. What the disciples were looking ahead, too far ahead, was the coming glory of the Son of Man. And in that glory, while sitting on the throne of judgement, the disciples wanted to know who among them was the greatest—they had wanted to make sure, relatively speaking, who would be in the position of power, kind of like second in command to Jesus.

To that dispute, Jesus gently reminded them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

As if to clarify his point, Jesus asked the disciples this question: “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves?” From a worldly perspective, the answer is obvious—the one at the table is obviously greater! Yet, Jesus asked again, rhetorical, “but I am among you as one who serve”

**As the one who serves**, and in stating so, Jesus set for us a model of servant leadership. He did not spell out in details, such as a 5-point summary, on what a servant leader should do or would be. Rather Jesus lay his life out for us all to see, in what he says, what he does, how he feels, and how he acts. His entire life is that of a servant leader. Following Jesus is not as simple as that often repeated slogan of WWJD—what would Jesus do. Rather, we are called, as Apostle Paul urges us in Philippians 2:5, to have the same mindset as that of Christ Jesus.

Many Bible scholars view the passage of Philippians 2:5-11 as an ancient hymn, song by the community of faith. So in a way Paul wasn’t just teaching us, he was in fact singing to us.

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

That phrase ‘emptied himself’ in Greek is ‘kenosis’. It is not a static verb, but an active and reflective verb, denoting an action that one does to oneself. So such self-emptying is entirely voluntary, entirely by one’s choice. Kenosis is also a continuous verb, denoting the action as present in tense, and undetermined in duration. In a sense, kenosis describes this self-emptying act as ongoing, without end.

What has Jesus been self-emptying of? You may ask. He has been self-emptying of his own will and becoming entirely receptive to the divine will of God. That is the mindset that Apostle Paul urges us to have, to follow. Unfortunately, the dominant mindset that we do see in North America, is far from that.

Author and theologian Sallie McFague, in her book titled *Blessed Are the Consumers*, published in 2013, calls out what she sees as the ‘religion of consumerism’, which she defines as ‘finding meaning and fulfillment through consumption of goods’. It is a pervasive mindset in the North American society. It regulates not only our mind, but also our actions, so much so it seems to demand our loyalty as well. McFague wrote that, ‘While we may be Democrats or Republican, Asians or African, Baptist or Presbyterian, PhDs or high-school dropout, males or females, what we all hold in common is our participation in the religion of consumerism—a reality that seems such a natural part of all our lives that we can scarcely imagine an alternative.’”

To illustrate her point, McFague points to the passionate speech that President George W. Bush gave immediately after the 9/11 attack in 2001, where citizens were urged as their patriotic duty to spend, to go to Disney World, and to enjoy life. It is as if we could spend our way out of any trouble, any conflict, any heartbreak.

In case one might be tempted to think that we as the society have changed, have evolved or have made much progress in the last twenty years. We haven’t! Just look closely at the past two years of the global pandemic. When we find ourselves locked down and locked in, what was our collective response? We shopped and spent massively, online. The methodology may have changed, but the mindset stays the same. There must be a better way!

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, urges Apostle Paul. To have the same mindset is to think, to judge, to seek for, and to care for, in the same way as that of Christ. Paul reminds us that we as the community of faith already shares in so many

aspects—same love, same Spirit, same Lord. Therefore, it is not too far of a stretch to share in the same attitude as that of Jesus, doing so through kenosis—of self-emptying and self-giving.

The noted English architect Sir Christopher Wren was once supervising the construction of a magnificent cathedral in London. A journalist thought it would be interesting to interview some of the workers on site. So he chose three and asked them this question, "What are you doing?" The first replied, "I'm cutting stone for 10 shillings a day." The next answered, "I'm putting in 10 hours a day on this job." But the third said, "I'm helping Sir Christopher Wren construct one of London's greatest cathedrals."

Perhaps that is the kind of mindset we as the community of faith ought to have—we are helping Jesus to build the greatest, the most worthy, the most glorious project, that is the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. We do so, not out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility we value others above ourselves. We do so not looking to our own interest, but each of us to the the interests of the others. We do so by serving others in the name of Jesus, as we follow the example set for us by Christ, **as one who serves**. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

I ask Daisy what she gets out of her work as an online interpreter? Why she continues doing what she does? She started that line of work two years ago when our family finance was in need. Yet she now finds tremendous meaning in helping others facing desperate situation yet unable to communicate properly—a young girl being sexually abused in her homestead, an old man gasping for air due to covid infection, someone getting into trouble with the law, or another finding it impossible to navigate the banking system. She may not be able to directly bear witness to the name of Jesus, but she does find time to pray for them, after the calls. And yes, she is proud to serve.

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**