

## The Serving Community

October 23, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### Luke 22:24-27

*<sup>24</sup> A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. <sup>25</sup> Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. <sup>27</sup> For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*

Author James Bryan Smith tells the story of two churches:

In my early days as the chaplain of Friends University, I was privileged to work with about a hundred college students who participated in the various ministries on campus, from a weekly fellowship gathering to retreats, small groups and mission work. I was the spiritual leader for these young people; they trusted me and often followed my lead. I got a call from a local pastor who asked me to lunch. He told me that his church had held a meeting and wanted to offer several thousand dollars to our campus ministry program. I was elated as I thought about what this money could do for our students. Then the pastor said, "All we are asking is that you teach a Sunday school class for young people." I agreed, and not long after there were about twenty-five students from the college who came to the class. Everything seemed to be going well.

Then I got a call from the pastor a month later. "Jim," he said, "we have a problem. Your college students are not attending our worship service. They are coming to your class and then leaving, either going to other churches or just going home." I was surprised to hear that. I was not aware of this problem as I myself also left to worship at our home church with my family. The pastor went on, "If you are not going to get your kids in worship, then we are not going to fund your ministry any longer." I asked some of the students in the Sunday school class why they did not want to worship in the church where we met—especially those who had no other church home. They all said the same thing: "It is boring. There is no one under fifty. No one even talks to us. So we stopped going." I could not force them to go, and soon I stopped teaching and the money was no longer given. Unfortunately, this church was focusing on its needs, not the students' needs.

In contrast, the following year I got a call from a layleader at another local church who said, "Jim, our church has been praying a lot, and we feel that we have a lot to offer young people. We are an older congregation, and not very large, but we have a lot of wisdom, and we care about the next generation. We know you work with college students, and we want to ask you to help us find out how to minister to them." Over the next few months I met with the people at this church. They had no money to offer. They simply wanted to know what college students need in a home church.

I told them that first, they like to eat. They are used to having no money, and the cafeteria

in those days was not open on Sundays. The people at the church said, “We are good at food.” Second, the students who are from out of state often miss their families. They could use a warm hug and a sense of being welcomed. The church folks said, “We are good at hugging.” I concluded, “I think that is about it.” Then one older lady said, “Will they like our worship style, Jim? We don’t have any guitars, just an organ, and we sing hymns.” I said, “If you love them and feed them, I don’t think they will mind. They are not as interested in being entertained as people think they are.”

I invited about a half-dozen students to attend the church with me. There was a lot of hugging when we came in the door. The worship service was a traditional one, with hymns and Scripture reading, some liturgy, a sermon and Communion. The pastor had a great heart and offered a solid message. I could tell that the students felt at home. There was nothing hip or cool about it, but they got plenty of hip and cool during the rest of the week. After the service, we went to the fellowship hall. The ladies of the church had made a feast, complete with the mandatory green bean casserole and Jell-O with fruit inside. The students loved it. So did I. In fact, I never left that church. It was such an others-minded congregation that, a few years later, they decided to end the ministry they had in that part of town to form a new congregation, which became Chapel Hill United Methodist Church, where I still attend.

What was the difference between the two churches? The first church was asking the question, What can we do to improve our church? The second church was asking, How can we serve others? The first church was operating from a narrative of self-focus. The second church was operating from a narrative of focusing on others. The first church cared only about its own image and its own preservation; having college students attend their church was a sign of success. The second church cared only about the well-being of the students; having college students in their midst was an opportunity to serve. When we are steeped in the reality of the kingdom, our focus shifts from our needs to the needs of others. It is only possible when we are caught up in the kingdom of God. Only then, when we are confident and secure, can we shift our focus away from ourselves and onto others.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to share the story about these two churches because I believe that it has much to say to our church and to any church that wants to be about the work of God’s kingdom rather than just being about self-preservation or proving how successful we are. I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard someone preface a statement to me regarding comparing our church to “one of the churches down the road.”

James Bryan Smith also tells of a time he once heard his friend, Dallas Willard, speak at a Conference in California. Dallas said, “I am going to teach you what is the single most important task of a Christian, especially those who are in church leadership.” There was a moment of silence as all the church leaders leaned forward to hear what Dallas Willard had to say. He leaned in to the microphone and said, “The most important task we have, especially for those in church leadership, is to pray for the success of our neighboring churches.” The leaders were stunned at first. They could think of a dozen other things that might be considered as the most important task for church leaders – prayer, small groups, caring for the poor, sharing faith with unbelievers, to name a few – but to pray for neighboring churches? That seems so, well,

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 68-70). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

counterproductive. So, James Bryan Smith cornered Dallas Willard after the talk to explain what he meant.

He said that when we pray, genuinely pray, for the success of the churches that are in our proximity, we are breaking the narrative of selfishness and entering into the mind of God, who is also praying for the success of those churches. The practice, he said, puts us in sync with the kingdom of God. He encouraged not only pastors but entire churches to do this.<sup>2</sup>

You see, churches are not to be in competition with each other. We are all on the same side. We are trying our best, with the grace of God, to draw more people to Jesus.

The good and beautiful community of Jesus finds its life and power in Jesus himself, who is not only our teacher but also our source of strength. As Jesus is, so are his followers. Jesus was a servant. He lived for the good of others. In the kingdom of this world, greatness is defined by power. The one who is served is greater than the one who serves. Jesus reversed this notion of greatness: "Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

His example becomes our example. Not merely because we want to imitate him and perhaps earn his favor. Being a servant of others is the highest way to live. Wanting and needing to be served by others is not life-producing but soul-destroying. Jesus showed us that by example. Jesus, the Creator of the universe, the King of all things, comes to serve. He washes the feet of the disciples. He lives to serve.

This is because he was and is moved by one thing: love. He told his disciples that the greatest expression of love is to give of yourself for the good of others. In fact, the greatest act of love would be to offer your life in exchange for the well-being of another should you be in a position do so. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

He not only taught it, he lived it. He gave his life for the good of others, including you and me. We who follow him as teacher are called on to do the same, to shift our focus away from ourselves and onto others.<sup>3</sup>

We have to be careful about giving away too much, for some people really struggle with that. We have to strive for a balance when it comes to serving others. We cannot burn out our own souls and bodies for the sake of serving others. We cannot neglect our friends and families for the sake of serving others. We need to listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit and be open to the discernment of others who can see things that we may not see.

It was my loving wife who first pointed out to me that I needed to take a break and get re-centered in God's will for me and for her. On one hand I could sense that God needed to make some changes in my life but that I was so busy trying to take care of others that I was not taking care of myself. As a consequence, I was not being the pastor that the people of this church needs right now to make a turnaround after the setback of COVID. Our Church Council has graciously granted me four weeks for renewal of mind, body and spirit in the month of January

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 76-77). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 70-71). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

next year. I covet your prayers as I spend some concentrated time in prayer, Scripture reading, and leading from the Holy Spirit as we prepare to take the next steps in our life together as a church.

It is one of the tasks of a pastor to lead a church in its vision. We have been through some difficult years together – from a time of brokenness and division when I first became your pastor in July 2015 through the challenges of COVID and recovery from COVID that the whole world continues to experience. We have been called to be “a beacon for God—helping people to see, to accept, and to grow in the light of Christ.” Now, we need to pray about what it means to know, follow, and serve Jesus who was among us as one who serves.