

A Kingdom of Servants

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Glenview New Church—June 6, 2010

“Whoever desires to become great among you, let him minister to you, and whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your servant—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” (Matthew 20:26-28)

There’s a part of us that wants to ensure a safe and happy future for ourselves and those we love. What parent wouldn’t love to know that his or her children will find a good life for themselves, with a family of their own and a set of useful activities that bring them joy? What husband, if he knows he’s likely to pass on before his wife, wouldn’t want to see her provided for in a home close to family and friends, and free from financial worries? Who among us, as we grow older wouldn’t want to ensure that we had a place that we could live, as independently as possible, without asking too much of our children in terms of our care? And thinking beyond this world, wouldn’t it be nice to know if we’re going to make it to heaven, and even to have a relatively clear idea of where in heaven we will live?

The mother in the story we focus on today had this desire. This mother of James and John, two of the twelve disciples, came to Jesus with a request. She wanted asked for her sons to be able to sit on the right hand and on the left hand of Jesus in His kingdom (Matthew 20:21). As the story goes on, we realize that these two sons are right there with her, full partners in this request. And we can easily recognize, despite the natural desire to procure a nice future, that there’s a tainted nature to this request.

That’s why Jesus replied, “You do not know what you ask” (vs. 22). He went on to describe how it is that people enter His kingdom. He said:

“You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.” (Matthew 20:23)

This cryptic answer has a lot packed into it. While some religions teach about assurances for those who have been “saved,” the New Church looks at salvation as a life-long process of striving to do what the Lord has commanded. That striving is represented by baptism—the entrance into the process, and the cup, the struggles that come as we try to obey (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5120:12). One of the core challenge we will face in this process—the cup that we will have to drink over and over again—is the desire to put ourselves first (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1594:4). Overcoming our selfish tendencies, which sometimes exhibit themselves in subtle little ways, takes a life-time of diligent focus. The Lord never wants us to stop striving. So He says, “to sit on my right hand and on My left is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father”—for those who submit to the process and allow the Lord to prepare them for heaven.

So how do we become prepared for heaven? In this context, the Lord’s message is to focus on the opposite of selfishness, which is service to those around us. This is what He told all of His disciples. After the other ten found out about the request of James and John, they were angry. The

Lord used this uncomfortable situation to teach them something vital about heaven. “The rulers of the Gentiles...exercise great authority. Yet is shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him minister to you, and whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). What will make us eventual members of the Lord’s kingdom is a focus on serving instead of putting ourselves first. Our task today is to see just a few of the many ways that this is true, and why it is vital for us to do all we can to rid ourselves of the desire to control and be served, replacing it instead with a desire to serve.

Heaven and Hell. Working with this essential contrast, we turn first to see the way things work in the next life. If heaven is our goal, then it is useful to see the way things work there. One of the defining characteristics of heaven is that everyone there desire to be of service to others, so much so that heaven itself is called a “kingdom of useful services” (*Conjugal Love* 7:3; see also *Arcana Coelestia* 696, 3645; *Heaven and Hell* 112). In fact, we could say that it is a kingdom of servants, with everyone trying to do what he or she can to make the lives of other people better. For those in heaven, their greatest delight comes from being able to help other human beings (*Spiritual Experiences* 5155; *Heaven and Hell* 402). “Nothing is more delightful to [them] than to perform useful services” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6325).

Hell on the other hand, is populated by people who have the opposite aim in mind. There all people love to rule over others and use them for selfish purposes. The love of ruling from the love of self is said to be “a universal love of hell” (*True Christian Religion* 661:4; cf. *Divine Providence* 215). What we come to understand is that the people there, because of their patterns of life here, have come to see themselves as the center of the universe, and the number one desire for them is to be served. They are professionals, as it were, of exercising control, of feeling superior to others, of manipulating situations to their advantage, of doing whatever they can to exalt themselves.

The Parable of the Trees. To give an example of the difference in nature between these two attitudes (focus on self versus a focus on use), we turn to the parable of the trees which we read about from Judges. Abimelech had just made himself king of Shechem by wiping out his seventy brothers—all except his youngest brother whose name was Jotham. The desire to rule is evident. To point that out, Jotham told a story about some trees seeking a king. First they asked an olive tree, then the fig tree, and then the vine. Each tree in turn answered in similar ways: “Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway over trees?” (Judges 9:9). “Should I cease my new wine, which cheers both God and men, and go to sway over trees?” (Judges 9:13).

But when they got to the bramble, they got a different response. The bramble, or thorn tree, accepted the offer and invited all the trees to take shelter in its shade. This is obviously a symbol for selfishness—of the destructive desire to rule over others. That destructiveness is encapsulated in the final words of the bramble: “But if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon!” (Judges 9:15). Those who desire to be served, if they don’t get what they want, can react with an anger and vengeance that is perfectly encapsulated in the destructive image of a forest fire.

When we look at what these trees symbolize the message becomes even more clear. The Lord uses an olive tree as a symbol in His Word for love which is devoted to the Lord Himself—love to the Lord (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 493). This is the highest kind of love. It can make us the

most useful. That's why the Lord had kings anointed with olive oil, with the intention of reminding those kings to focus on serving the Lord. This is also why oil was used to light the lamps in the Tabernacle—to worship the Lord. A person who is motivated by the Lord delights in service. She or he says to herself, "I hear the Lord calling me to be of service, and I recognize that by doing so I am serving my God."

A "fig tree" is a symbol for obedience—just doing what the Lord asks us to. It is related to the Jewish Church at that time, with their focus on rituals, sacrifices, festivals, and obeying the ordinances of the Lord (see *Arcana Caelestia* 4231). A person motivated by obedience says in effect, "God says it; I'll do it." Such a person would do things for others out of a sense of duty, even if the love or internal motivation is not there.

The vine represents being led by truth (see *Arcana Caelestia* 9277:4). We can think of the wine of the holy supper, which is a symbol for the teachings the Lord gives us which shows us how to live a life of service. A person who is motivated by the truth thinks about what the Lord has said—in this context, concerning how to be of service to others. It means forgiving, going the extra mile, resisting retaliation, looking for the goodness in others, adopting a humble attitude which recognizes the flaws we have at least as much as we notice the flaws of others, and so on.

Interestingly, these three trees are presented in this order for a further reason. The goal for all of us is to allow the Lord to develop within us a deep and abiding love for Him. To follow the analogy of trees, we are to be a tree planted by the rivers of water, taking in light from the sun, and bearing fruit. This love will express itself in a willingness to serve others from a desire to honor the Lord. This is the olive tree. If we're not there yet, we can get started in that direction by obeying the Lord's commands; we can do what He says, and avoid what He forbids. This is the fig tree. We can also learn more about service from the Lord's Word. We can come to understand why service is so important to the Lord, and how pervasive it is to His system. Some of the teachings we discussed about heaven and hell fit into this category. This is the vine.

Relationships. One related set of teachings on this subject shows how important it is for us to watch out for our desire to dominate, and focus instead on being useful. It comes on the work of the Writings for the New Church concerning marriage. One of the reasons that married couples experience cold states, or times when they do not love each other as much, is "competition between [them] for superiority" (*Conjugial Love* 248). Another passage in the same work elaborates by saying, "After a married couple has passed through the initial stages of marriage, contests arise between them over who has what right and who has what power" (*Conjugial Love* 291). Notice that it doesn't say that this happens only with some couples. It seems that the love of dominion from the love of self creeps into all marriages to some degree, in the form of wanting to get the upper hand—wanting to be seen to be right, wanting to other person to do more to make life easier. It's something all married couples need to look out for.

The implied message is that the opposite leads to greater warmth and love in marriage. To the extent that a husband or wife seeks to be of use to the other, and resists the urge to be served, genuine love can flourish.

With this principle in mind, we can broaden the application to all relationships: the love of dominion brings coldness, contempt, bitterness and retaliation. On the other hand, people tend to

respond to acts of kindness and service with great appreciation and warmth. They also tend to respond in kind.

The Lord's example. The Lord ended His lesson for His disciples by speaking about Himself. He said, "The Son of Man did not come to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). If we want to see how important this message of service is, all we need to do is look at the Lord's example. The Lord came on earth for the sole purpose of helping people, of serving. We can see this in the context of our story for today. Right before the mother of James and John made her request, the Lord told a parable about workers in a vineyard—about people serving in His church—and immediately afterwards He healed two blind men. He taught about usefulness, and then showed how He Himself chose to minister and serve the people who so desperately needed His help (see Matthew 20:1-16, 29-34).

The story of James and John desiring to sit on the right hand and left hand of Jesus in His kingdom gave the Lord the opportunity to teach us one of the most important truths concerning His kingdom. It is an environment which operates on the basis of use. He wants us to understand also the opposite—not only how distasteful it is for people to blatantly promote themselves, like James and John did, but also how destructive the love of self can be—like a fire that breaks forth in angry rages when someone captivated by selfish love doesn't get his or her way.

Truly this central principle, if it were all we focused on, is something we could work on every single day of our lives, as we interact with others, and strive to make a positive impact. It is this principle of spiritual life that can most lead us to prepare for heaven. It is the single-most important message we can teach our children, to ensure that they have a happy life in this world and the next. The truth is, to the extent that we set our hearts on being a servant rather than feeding our inherent need to be served, the Lord will feed our love of usefulness together with its reward. Our lives will be fruitful. There will be a sweetness and wholesomeness to it—like the fruits of a tree. We will have a growing sense that we are headed in the right direction—toward our place in His heavenly kingdom, which is a kingdom of servants. **Amen.**

Readings from the Word: Matt. 20:20-28; Judges 9:7-15; *Arcana Coelestia* 1419; *Conjugial Love* 7:3.

Matthew 20:20-28.

²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

²¹And He said to her, "What do you wish?"

She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."

²²But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

They said to Him, "We are able."

²³So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and

those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him minister to you. ²⁷And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your servant—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Judges 9:7-15.

⁷ Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out. And he said to them:

“Listen to me, you men of Shechem,
That God may listen to you!

⁸ “The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them.
And they said to the olive tree,
‘Reign over us!’

⁹ But the olive tree said to them,
‘Should I cease giving my oil,
With which they honor God and men,
And go to sway over trees?’

¹⁰ “Then the trees said to the fig tree,
‘You come and reign over us!’

¹¹ But the fig tree said to them,
‘Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit,
And go to sway over trees?’

¹² “Then the trees said to the vine,
‘You come and reign over us!’

¹³ But the vine said to them,
‘Should I cease my new wine,
Which cheers both God and men,
And go to sway over trees?’

¹⁴ “Then all the trees said to the bramble,
‘You come and reign over us!’

¹⁵ And the bramble said to the trees,
‘If in truth you anoint me as king over you,
Then come and take shelter in my shade;
But if not, let fire come out of the bramble
And devour the cedars of Lebanon!’

***Arcana Caelestia* 1419**

A heavenly attitude does not consist in seeking to be the greatest, but, by serving all others, to be the least, as the Lord Himself has stated in Matthew,

It shall not be so among you, but whoever desires to become great among you, let him minister to you, and whoever desires to become first, let him be your servant, even as the Son of Man did not come to be ministered to but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Matthew 20:26-28.

...Since the Lord is love itself, that is, the very essence and life of everyone's love in heaven, He wishes to impart to the human race everything that is His, which is what He meant when He spoke about the Son of Man coming to give His life a ransom for many.

Conjugal Love 7:3

Learn therefore what is meant by kings and princes and by reigning with Christ. It means to be wise and perform useful services. For the kingdom of Christ, namely, heaven, is a kingdom of useful services. The reason is that the Lord loves all people and so wills good to all, and good means useful service. Now because the Lord performs good or useful services indirectly through angels, and in the world through people, therefore to those who faithfully perform useful services He gives a love of being useful and its reward. The reward is internal blessedness, and this blessedness is eternal happiness.