

**“A Community of Service”**  
a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
**BASED ON THE THEME, “GO! COMMUNITY”**  
**Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.**  
**August 8, 2010**

**Luke 22:24-30 [ NIV ]**

<sup>24</sup>Also a dispute 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. <sup>28</sup>You are those who have stood by me in my trials. <sup>29</sup>And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, <sup>30</sup>so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

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**G**reatness is a great topic to debate. Everywhere you look there are “greatest [ fill in the blank ] lists” Who was the greatest baseball player ever? Who was the greatest football player ever? Because of course we want to argue about the most important things first.

The disciples are debating greatness. What’s wrong with that? Shouldn’t one strive to be a “great” disciple? I wish more of us would have that debate and maybe it would motivate us. I wonder what criteria they were using, because I bet Peter could throw a wicked curve ball but I doubt his fast ball would overwhelm anyone. Would they base it on number of converts evangelized as it seems some churches do today? Would they base it on number of miracles performed? Would they base it on who suffered the most?

I’m thinking Peter and Paul are probably numbers 1 and 1a in any of those lists.

But Jesus speaks up and stops the discussion. Is Jesus just being a spoilsport? Why does he throw a wet blanket on their debate? What he does, of course, is change the criteria of the debate. He says we can’t live by the definitions, the values, the priorities of the culture around us. We can’t live like the most important thing in the world is Mr. Blackwell’s 10 best dressed celebrities really matters. One thing about Jesus, he rarely leaves his disciples comfortable. He almost always is challenging them, chastising them, etc. If you want to be left alone, or only want Jesus to comfort you about what you believe and how you live, you might not want to hang around Jesus too long. He is almost always changing the criteria, reorienting our values, resetting

our compasses. This morning he reorients the discussion on what makes for greatness in God's eyes.

We have been looking at the kind of community of faith we want to be. Would it be too much if I said we want to be a great community of faith, a great church, and we all want to be great disciples? Last week we talked about being a community of acceptance, or inclusion and how that is important, and how that is faithful to the kind of community Christ seeks to create with the church. That's the first step in greatness if you ask me. Today I want to look at how Jesus calls us to be a community of service too. He reminds them and us that he came to them as one who serves and invites us to follow his example.

Many of you are already engaged in regular acts of service. You are part of Family Promise or have gone to the City Rescue Mission or serve as a Stephen Minister. I have asked a few people to share a little bit with you about their experience of service and maybe to inspire both those of you who are already one of those who help us live out this call to service, as well as those of you who maybe aren't sure about stepping out on that boundary line.

Jim Brandel has become involved in a couple of our ministries and I have asked him to comment on his experience with City Rescue Mission. Caroline Havens has been on several of the youth mission trips where they have performed acts of service for others and I have asked her to talk a bit about that.

Finally, Nancy Ricker has become active in our work through ICARE – the Interfaith Coalition for Action Reconciliation and Empowerment. I have asked her to share how that is a venue for service too and what that experience has been like for her.

Now you have heard how serving has been a blessing to each of these folks. Look at what Jesus says the outcome of serving is. We will go through trials, but Christ will confer on us a kingdom! He says the disciples would become judges over the twelve tribes of Israel. Now a lot of people take this promise out of context. Jesus is talking about judging in the Old Testament sense. In the Old Testament judging did not mean determining guilt or innocence – it meant leading with integrity and with faith. The “judges” of early Judaism were God's version of the world's “kings and queens.” They were leaders who helped guide the people to be faithful to God. The promise Christ makes to those disciples – and I think to us as well – is that we will have the privilege of showing others what it means to live with integrity and faith.

I want to suggest to you that the invitation to serve and to be a community of service leads to three specific blessings. It is the invitation to know a greater satisfaction, to know faith in a greater God, and it is an invitation to become a greater “self,” or a greater person. In other words it is the invitation to make it to the top of Christ's “greatest ever” list.

First, to seek to serve is an invitation to experience greater satisfaction by doing good deeds for the common good as opposed to the lesser satisfaction of a culture that says it comes from acquiring or using the most goods for myself. I know this is counter – cultural. Every message we get from our culture is that satisfaction is found in pursuing our own pleasure, privilege, and power. Jesus says real satisfaction comes when we can see that we have done more for the common good than for our own ease. The path of service is not the easy path, but the Christian faith has always talked about taking up our cross willingly – not to attain heaven, but to fulfill our purpose as followers of Christ. So serving is the invitation to reject the false god of self-satisfaction which Jesus exposes when he says the real kingdom of God comes to those who serve.

In order to be a community of service we have to accept the invitation and the challenge to believe in the value of self-denial for the sake of becoming more fully a real self! In essence, all serving is an act of caregiving – as Stephen Ministry is an act of caregiving. Arthur Kleinman wrote an article about what it means to be a caregiver based on his experience caring for his wife who was suffering from Alzheimers. He says, caregiving is also a defining moral practice. It is a practice of empathic imagination, responsibility, witnessing, and solidarity with those in great need. It is a moral practice that makes caregivers, and at times even the care-

receivers, more present and thereby fully human.”<sup>1</sup>

The invitation to create and be part of a community of service is the invitation to believe in the one real God and to live our lives according to his values rather than the culture’s. The false gods of our culture tell us exactly what the serpent told Adam and Eve – that we can be like gods if we just worship ourselves enough. When we choose to serve others we reject the god of “Self” and we proclaim a greater God – the God we know through Jesus Christ. And it is Jesus who reminds us he came to serve not to be served. He reminds us that real greatness is found in sacrifice, service, and selflessness rather than in power, privilege, and pleasure.

Most people come to church because they think church is there to serve them. The truth is that doesn’t make us disciples it makes us religious consumers. Christ calls us to be more than that. He calls us to choose to serve as a sign of our decision to seek greatness not just personal fulfillment. To choose to serve is to choose to be more than a religious consumer; it is to choose to be someone who is following Christ into places that can be difficult, sometimes painful to see, and require courage that comes from beyond our own strength. It is a decision to rely on God’s strength. This is how we find faith in a greater God, the Living God. Let us strive to be the Community of Service Christ calls us to be. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Kleinman, [harvardmagazine.com/2010/07/on-caregiving](http://harvardmagazine.com/2010/07/on-caregiving).