

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

October 11, 2009

Servant Ministry
(Fourth in series, *The Treasures of the Church*)

Ministry group recognized: Mission Trippers

Sometimes it is easy to get Christianity wrong. Countless people outside the church seem to have done it and even many within the church sometimes have a basic misunderstanding about Christianity. The apostles James and John sure got it wrong. Apparently, they thought that following Jesus was meant to bring them respect and prestige.

Matthew tells us that the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked that her sons might sit one on his left and one on his right when he rules in the eternal kingdom. We might understand the mother's role in the mistake. On the one hand, mothers might often be the first to point out to their sons the flaws the mothers see. On the other hand, no one might believe in a man more deeply, be willing to forgive a man more quickly, and continue to think the best of a man more persistently than his mother. So, here is one man's assessment of the relationship of mothers to their adult sons, even though you may accuse me of some cowardice for saying this now when there are so many women of the church away on retreat including my own wife. In the relationship of mothers to their adult sons, I think that sometimes mothers can be overly critical of the son's little flaws while remarkably blind to some of his major ones. Now, if that is at all true, I am not complaining. Indeed, it is a grace that men might very much need; at least, I think, I very much need it. So we might not want to be too hard on the mother of James and John.

But what about James and John? They were with Jesus on a regular basis, listening to him and watching him. We might be less gracious to them. They should have known better, but still they went with their mother to Jesus in support of her request on their behalf, and Jesus turned them all down together. *Can you drink from my cup*, he asked them? *Yes*, they said. *Yes*, Jesus replies, with some sadness we might think, *you will drink it*. In other words, you will suffer for my sake. *But I don't know who will sit at my right and left that is not mine to grant.* (Matthew 20:22,23)

Here is what the disciples should have known. They should have known that a basic idea of Christianity is that life is richer, fuller, more exciting, just simply better, when service to God by serving others is the ultimate motivation for what we do. The

more we humbly serve others the happier we will be. Christians really believe that. Christians believe that the more we genuinely serve others the happier we will be. And, I think, that when all is said and done, that is why mission trippers are mission trippers. They either knew it to be true before they went on their first mission trip or on some level they thought it might be true, as by a sort of spiritual instinct, or they didn't even think about it much beforehand and went on their first mission trip just because they wanted to be helpful and then by experience found it to be true, in any case, they know it now. The more we genuinely serve others the happier we are. That is why mission trippers go on mission trips. That is why Christians have been going on mission trips of one type or another for two thousand years.

In late April, I journeyed to Cedar Rapids Iowa for training as the Disaster Response Coordinator for the Connecticut Conference. The Cedar River, which flows through Cedar Rapids, overflowed its banks a few months earlier destroying or severely damaging two thirds of the town. No attempt will be made at restoring about one third of the homes and other buildings damaged because it is thought the chance of their being damaged again in another flood was too great. Neighboring towns up and down the Cedar River and other rivers in Iowa were flooded as well. In the towns of Palo and Oakville, nearly every building was severely damaged or destroyed. When damage is as extensive and devastating as that, no individual homeowner and no individual community has the wherewithal to recover without the help of others. The damage is too great.

Sometimes it is said that there are people in need right here so why travel to help others somewhere else? Well, should we not care about the people of Cedar Rapids? Would Christ have us just let them do what they can for themselves and whatever they can not do, too bad for them? I am glad to hear of concern for the needs of people here. I share in that concern. But when the need somewhere else is more than the people or communities suffering can meet for themselves, why not do what we can to help them as well?

We might remember the story of a woman who anointed Jesus as a sign of respect and love with an expensive perfume and Jesus was criticized for allowing it. The perfume, the critics said, could have been sold and the money given to the poor. And Jesus answered, *the poor are always here, and you can give to them anytime you want. But I will not always be here. She has anointed me for my burial. (Matthew 26:10-12)* The application might be something like this. People who need help are always here. Anyone can help them anytime anyone wants.

Shortly after we moved to East Hartford I renovated the basement in our home. A few years later, inexplicably, the water table where we live changed. Our basement was flooded with an inch or two of water which came up through the ground. The way to fix the problem was to dig trenches into the basement floor under all four walls of the house and two additional trenches through the middle of the floor, lay perforated pipe through

the trenches and then fill in the trenches with stones. In preparation the flood water needed to be vacuumed off the floor, the rugs torn up, and all the furniture carried upstairs. My workbench had to be unfastened from the wall and pulled into the center of the workroom and all the shelves emptied and moved. The baseboards needed to be pulled off the walls lest they get beat up by the jackhammers digging the trenches underneath them. The sinks, the shower stall and the cabinets had to be detached from the walls and carried upstairs.

It was exhausting labor and it was for only two inches of water. I needed to persevere at what seemed sometimes an endless task as well as endure the disappointment of seeing much of my initial renovation work ruined or dismantled. How much more overwhelming it must be when in some sort of disaster one's entire home is damaged or destroyed as well as all other homes for miles?

The restoration of our basement is completed now so please do not be alarmed for us. I am sharing this story with you because some time in the midst of the cleanup, and the emptying, and the restoring, I was sitting at the kitchen table taking a break with a Tupperware cup of soft drink in my hand when Debbie reminded me of something that still needed to be done. Now I am not a violent person and almost never have any problem with temper. But at that time Debbie's comment was enough to put me over the edge, and for the moment, blind with rage, I hollered and threw the cup I was holding still half filled with soft drink against the kitchen wall. I threw it so hard that it left the imprint of the lip of the cup in the wall. It's still there. I haven't fixed it yet. I suppose I will some day, but not yet. You can see it if ever you want. It is a reminder to me to hold my temper and of one other important thing, of the time I was so close to being unable to recover by myself.