

***Lenten Sermon Series: (Re)Discovering Jesus: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical***

***Sermon Title: "The Revolutionary Jesus"***

***Matthew 20:25-28; I Peter 4:8-11; Psalm 146; Micah 6:6-8***

***Salem United Methodist Church; March 6, 2016***

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In two weeks we will begin Holy Week, the week that Jesus was arrested, crucified, buried, and rose again. Yes, it is only three weeks until Easter. During this season of Lent we are reexamining who we are in relationship to Jesus Christ so that when Holy Week arrives we have a deeper understanding of why Jesus went to the cross. Our Lenten sermon series is looking at the teachings of Jesus as ones that were countercultural, revolutionary, and radical two thousand years and still are today.

Tonight thousands of people will be watching the final episode of *Downton Abbey*. This British drama had six successful seasons featuring the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants. The setting is an English estate between 1912-1926. Every Sunday evening we watched the goings and comings of the Lord and Lady of the manor as they have dealt with technological and societal changes. We have also watched the lives of their servants who work so faithfully behind the scenes to make sure everything in the household runs like clockwork and meet every need of the Crawley family. In the early part of the twentieth century a British estate house could have as many as 40-50 servants to make the estate run smoothly. Their daily tasks ranged from dressing the members of the family to shooting game for dinner. These servants gave their lives for the aristocratic families. They left their families and homes to be in service. The life of a servant was not a prestigious one, but an important one in British society.

Our Gospel lesson has Jesus speak about being a servant. He wasn't referring to being a butler or the lady's maid, although Jesus did live in a class system similar to that of the British society. In the Roman Empire of the first century, one percent of the people held power over the remaining ninety-nine percent. Servants and slaves were the lowest on the societal ladder. Those who had power exploited those of lower status with little regard for their life or property. In this passage in Matthew, one mother is looking out for her sons, James and John. If Jesus is the Messiah, when he comes into power, she wanted a guarantee that her sons will be part of that one percent. She wanted assurance that her sons would become upwardly mobile, but she misunderstood the power that Jesus had. It is counter to the culture's concept of power. In fact it is revolutionary. Jesus doesn't come to be placed on a throne, to wield his power, and exploit others, or even to have servants meeting his every need. No, Jesus states that he has come to serve God and to serve humanity. How does Jesus do this? He serves with selfless acts of compassion, mercy, justice, and salvation. Jesus came to serve, not be served. This concept was the opposite from the way things were. In the culture of the first century as it is in most cultures, those with the most wealth have the most power. Power can become addictive. The more power one has the more power one wants. People have harmed others and even killed to obtain power. Wars have been fought to gain even more power.

What Jesus is proposing to his disciples is radically new. It is outside and beyond the established way of life. It is revolutionary. Jesus tells his followers not to be power hungry and rule like tyrants, but they are to humble themselves and become servants. Then as they serve, they will be great in God's eyes. This idea was and still is countercultural. No one in their right mind wants to be a lowly servant. Everyone wants to be the person at the top who holds the power. Relinquishing power is hard. But for Jesus the real power comes in being in the trenches serving. Actually this was not some new dream of Jesus. He is just highlighting what God had already intended for us. Jesus is refocusing us to our covenant with God, reinterpreting the law. The laws God gave Moses begin with our worship of God: putting God first in our lives and honoring God with our lives. And the way we do that is by offering kindness and making sure that everyone is treated justly, even to the point where we are giving of ourselves, making sacrifices of our time, talents, and lives.

Being servants or being in servant ministry is at the heart of the Christian faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined the purpose of the church as one that exists for others. It does not dominate, but is about helping and serving. Jesus offers us this model of servanthood when he washed the disciples' feet. God also offers us a model for servant ministry in Psalm 146. Here we see God serving humanity no matter what their needs are. God creates justice to the oppressed, feeds the hungry, gives sight to the blind, offers freedom to

those imprisoned, and cares for the immigrant, widow, and orphaned. Jesus didn't come to show us a new way of life, but to highlight a way of life that God always intended for us. Jesus divinely and humbly came to serve humanity. And as baptized Christians, we are to serve God and others in the same way humbly and sacrificially. What does it mean for us to be servants today? Do we quit our jobs to become a butler? Only if you want to become a butler. To be God's servant is to be in relationship with God. Then as this relationship develops and we experience spiritual growth as a work of God's grace, we will understand what it means to serve God's people. We will respond to God's grace by doing justice, offering mercy, and being kind to each other. John Wesley stated it this way. Do no harm and do good. This is our revolutionary rally cry. Yet, so much in our culture is about getting ahead and harming another to do so. How do we as Christians do no harm? One way is not to speak words of hate and speak out against the hate in our world. How do we do good? One way is to respect each other's beliefs and political perspectives even if they differ from our own. When we show this respect we are modeling both for our children and our community that people with different points of view can be united, can be loving, can serve each other.

We at Salem are revolutionaries. Why? Because we are servants. It's the way we express God's love. On Sunday mornings, we come together to a worship service from different walks of life, different perspectives, different places in society, and yes, even different opinions about God and Jesus. We come to a worship service. These two words belong together. As we worship we are serving God, honoring God, noticing God in our midst. Then we serve others through our ministries: Bible studies, Sunday School, youth group, serving meals both here at the church and at the Lord's Table, Appalachia Service Project, men's and women's ministries. Everything we do at Salem is about serving: from the serving on the trustees to washing dishes in the kitchen. Another way in which we serve each other is when one of us is in need; we do what we can to serve them, to meet their needs. We at Salem strive to do no harm. We strive to do good. We are a lot like the early church. They embodied servant ministry. They not only took care of each other, but they also extended their servant ministry to those in need in the community. They laid aside their selves to identify with the helpless. By being servants to their community, they set themselves apart from their culture that didn't care. The early church's selfless service was attractive and contagious to those outside the church. This is how the church grew. A third century Christian apologist named Felix wrote, "We do not merely preach good things. We practice them."

The early church grew exponentially because it built relationships with people in need and then introduced them to the One who came to serve us, who gave his life for us. This was how the early church evangelized. Yes, I said that word that both repels and attracts people. When we think of evangelism we think of roaring preachers spouting hell fire and damnation. The word, evangelism, really means to share the Good News. One of the best ways to share the Good News is by being a servant to others, by practicing our faith. Evangelism is a way of living. We evangelize through how we relate to others. We evangelize when we offer our gifts and allowing the gifts of others to enrich us in return. It is through building these genuine relationships that we can share the most important force in our lives, Jesus. Evangelism is about doing good, about serving, and then in the midst of doing good, sharing our faith and why we do good.

We do good things at Salem. How do we share with our friends, relatives, and neighbors the good things that are happening here? Also, good things are happening in our community? God is at work both in the church and outside the church. What good things do you see happening around us? A good servant pays attention to what is needed and then responds to that need. Being a servant of God is about paying attention to the good God is doing in the lives of people. A servant of God recognizes how God is at work all around us. How is God's hand providing, guiding, caring? How do we see people using their gifts to do good in our community? How can Salem join in doing good things for God's purpose?

These are the two goals for the church to further our vision and mission. To connect with others and invite them to be a part of our many servant ministries. And to connect to what God is already doing in our community and join in. As servants of God, who is God calling you to invite? As servants of God, how can we join in with what is already happening in our community?

**Resources:** *The Renegade Gospel* by Mike Slaughter; *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia* by John Chryssavgis

