

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

As the director of service learning at an Episcopal school, I spend a lot of time thinking what it means to help people. Jesus repeatedly taught that the path to God lies in serving others and in the Church, we talk a lot about something called "servant leadership." It's a lovely phrase. It gives dignity to service and hints that the best leadership finds its wisdom in compassion. Even the Dalai Lama says that social service is what Christians do best. But I've done a lot of serving and a lot of leading, and though the warm fuzzy in me wants to believe I can do both at the same time, the clear eyed scholar in me reminds me that serving and leading are very different ways of being in the world. When I lead, I am calling others to follow me, or my curriculum, or to accept the helpful path to prosperity that I have chosen for them. Much of what we call social service is in fact social leadership, even social engineering. When I serve, on the other hand, I wait. I wait for others to tell me what they want and what they need. I get bossed around. I am often bored. When I lead, I give away the best in me. When I serve, others take what they want. Or as Jesus cryptically tells Peter in this morning's Gospel, "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

As a young Californian, growing up in the Bay Area during the 1950's and 1960's, I developed a real passion for saving the world through social change and social programs. In those days, servant leadership meant serving a cause. It grew partly out of the activist Church and partly out of a fervent, if not very well articulated, feeling on my part that the world was unjust and that it was my duty to do something about it. "If you're not part of the solution," said the world in those days, "you're part of the problem." Beneath all that political, social and religious enthusiasm lay the unquestioned assumption that the whole purpose of human intelligence is to improve ourselves and others, that no matter who we are, we are not good enough, that the world is a broken and dangerous place.

Today, even though community service has become such a part of the culture that it is now, or soon will be, required to graduate from High School in California, I don't hear the word service as much as I once did. Service seems too ineffectual. Today's activists talk not about serving but about "making a difference." Indeed, a recent article about pro bono work in the Marin Bar Association Newsletter used the phrase "making a difference" as a synonym for volunteering. As if the rest of one's legal life made no difference at all.

"Making a difference" is a very different sort of phrase than "community service." Service, as I said earlier, is giving oneself to others. Community service emphasizes the importance of community. Making a difference, on the other

hand, praises my initiative and my impact. Initiative is well and good. But can it be service?

This is not an easy question, but I think it may be an important one in our fractious age and in a church that – and I don't care whether you are a liberal, a progressive, an evangelical, a fundamentalist, a Roman Catholic or what – all branches of the church at this moment believe that it is the mission of the Church to save the world from itself.

I've been reading a book on this very subject. Its author, a Christian professor of sociology at Virginia University, listed several pages of mission statements from various denominations of the church and various para church organizations like the Campus Crusade, or Focus on the Family, and all are relentlessly activist. Here are some of them. One denomination says that the work of the church is "renewing the church to transform the world;" another states that "a revolution (of justice and peace) is precisely what God's work, God's mission is all about." A third says that the work of the church is "transforming the structures of society, working for justice, and preserving the earth." A conference of Bishops write, "Our faith demands that we influence the political world. Our teaching calls us to it. Our nation needs it, and others depend on it. We can make a difference." Or this: "It is vital for us to become God's agents in shaping this culture and bringing biblical truth to bear on all of life." Or this: "to equip today's student leaders to impact culture for Christ." Another seeks "to train world-changers."¹

What all these missions, conservative and progressive, share, is the vision that the Church is primarily in the business of personal and social transformation, and that at some level, the Church is a political body. Jesus may not have overthrown Rome when he was around, but sometimes I feel we're determined to succeed where Jesus failed. Do something. Today's Gospel can be read as manifesto. Having triumphed over death, Jesus comes back to organize his followers to change the world.

So let me ask. Do you feel like you are changing the world when you turn up on Sunday? More to the point, is that really what being a Christian is all about?

Getting back to my reflection on servanthood and leadership, I find it much easier to lead than to serve, and this is where Jesus challenges me to grow the most. As far as I can tell, Jesus never came to change the world. (Indeed, he tells Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world," and is crucified rather than engage in social reform.) Like all great religious teachers, he came to teach us not how to change world, but how to live in the world as it is. He actually transformed no one except himself when he died and was resurrected. His disciples remain outwardly quite consistent: Peter remains the same rather bumbling and literal old

¹ Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Lutheran (ELCA), Catholic Bishops, Wilberforce Society, Campus Crusade, Focus on the Family, various Christian colleges such as Indiana Wesleyan, Christendom College

fisherman at the end of the Gospels as he was in the beginning, always wondering about things and taking a long time to understand. John begins and ends as a spiritual seeker and a mystic, and Paul, despite his dramatic conversion, remains zealous toward his cause. There may even be a reason for all these things. Maybe truth consists not of social programs and improvements, but of finding how a bumbler, a mystic and a zealot combine to reveal a truth that is greater than any one of them. The Kingdom of God is not some ideal in the future. It is already here. It was here in Jesus' day and it is still here now. The only problem is that very few of us are able to see it. That's likely because although Peter, John and Paul remained outwardly unchanged, inside, they were radically different people, having turned their bumbings, mysticism and zeal from a false vision of the world to a true one. Inner change is slower and more subtle than outer action and is only one reason why it takes years to internalize the Gospel.

That's where the Church's teachings about Grace come in. This story is not only about the call to service. It's also about grace. Despite Peter's best efforts, his nets come up empty after a night's work. Then, someone calls out from the shore, asking how it's going. They have no idea who this person is, but when he suggests casting their nets over to the right, well, no harm in trying, so they do. Suddenly, nothing turns into everything. Peter, being Peter, turns to the logistics of dealing with such a prodigious success; it is John the mystic who recognizes the hand of God and whispers to his friend who the mysterious stranger has to be. At which point, Peter covers up his nakedness and jumps into the water (usually when people swim it is more the other way around, so think conversion.)

Jesus has a nice charcoal fire going and invites them to breakfast. After they had eaten, he says to Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter says "yes." "Feed my lambs." He says this three times, to the point where Peter's feelings are hurt. What kind of a thick headed person do you take me for? I love you. Do you not know this?

Of course Jesus knows it, but he also knows that it takes time for understanding to sink in. When Rabbinical scholars plumb Biblical texts they always pay attention to repetition. Repetition tells us to take note, do a double take, sit with this particular piece of wisdom. Repetition tells us that the first meaning we get out of a story isn't going to be the real one. Stories, unlike spreadsheets, seldom mean what they say. Repetition also tells us that something is very important.

153 fish have suddenly appeared. Jesus has suddenly appeared. It's easy to be overcome with the sheer grace of the experience, to be dazzled by the light of God, to feel chosen. But this grace is only half the story.

To experience grace is also to work. Which is why grace and work is a continuum, not a distinction. Grace tells me what to do. If I am given fish, I feed people. If I am given knowledge, I teach people. If I am given children, I love

them. If I am given land, I take care of it. There's a great calm and sense of purpose that comes when I discover my real work. "Be still and know that I am God." It's one of the ways I know that the world in which we live, with all its frantic busyness, is not going to save us. But I also know I can't change it, either. The task is very different. God asks me to find where, in my hectic life, lies the hidden infusion of grace. Peter found it in the midst of daily life. So, therefore, can I.

When we gather on Sundays, we call this a "service." We pray. We are fed. We are given the chance to ponder sacred wisdom together. We listen. There is nothing more wonderful in this life than a living relationship with the living God. As today's Gospel says: sometimes we don't recognize it, but it is stronger than death and if we keep doing the daily things like casting our nets, great treasure will be ours. This, I think, is the spirit in which I think we are called to serve our community. We already make a difference. Amen