

RAISED UP TO SERVE

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on February 9, 2003.
Mark 1:29-39

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I read recently that a Michigan church advertises guilt-free sermons in air-conditioned comfort. The advertisement got me thinking about how we live in a consumer-oriented culture. We live in a market driven culture where businesses market their products by promising they can provide services no one else can. Service means everything. Consumers want good service. Consumers don't want to *serve*. We want to *be served*. If we don't like the service a car dealer gives *we'll go to another dealer*. If we don't receive good service at a restaurant *we don't leave a tip*. If we receive shoddy service at a department store, *we don't shop there again*. We want service and convenience. If we go shopping in Oxford and we can't find a parking space *right in front of a store* we don't feel guilty abandoning our local businesses and driving 30 miles to a mall where there's plentiful parking but we still have to walk a quarter mile to the mall entrance.

We live in a consumer oriented culture. The basic assumption in a consumer-oriented culture is that happiness comes from being served. For example, don't you feel happy when as soon as you finish a cup of coffee at a restaurant the waitress is there to fill your cup? Now what happens when we carry that attitude -- the consumer oriented attitude -- into the church? *What happens when we begin to see the church or God or Jesus Christ primarily as a provider of services -- for us?* "What's Jesus going to do for me?" What happens when the primary message of the church is: Are you happy? Do you want to be healthy? Do you want to get rich? Then come to Jesus -- he will meet your every need. ^{Hopefully . . .} Do you see any danger in this kind of emphasis? Consumer oriented attitudes, when applied to the church, say to the church, or God, or Christ: "Provide me with the service or product I want in *exchange* for my money and the privilege of keeping my business."

But the Bible introduces us to a strange new world where *Jesus raises us up to serve others*. Jesus challenges our consumer-oriented culture -- at least as applied to the church. Our Gospel lesson shows us a day in the life of Jesus. Jesus and four close friends attend a morning worship service. After the sermon, final hymn and benediction, the five leave for the home of Simon (Peter) and Andrew. Simon Peter's mother in law also lives there. She didn't go to worship because she had a fever. Now it makes you wonder why Simon and

Andrew would bring Jesus and two others home for lunch when they knew their mother in law was sick. Maybe Simon thought Jesus might be able to heal his mother in law. So when they get home they *immediately* tell Jesus about the sick woman and Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

Some people don't like this story because the only detail reported about the woman is that, after the fever left, “she served them.” ^{There is more, we can say} The story has been used to support unhealthy stereotypes of the role of women – as if their sole purpose is to serve their men. But before you write off the story consider how the Gospel of Mark consistently describes women. *In every case Mark makes the role of women the model of Christian discipleship.* Every time Mark draws our attention to a woman she's showing us the proper response to Jesus. For example, a widow with two small coins gives all she has. *We don't know her name* but she models what it means to follow Jesus – *to give all we have.* Mark tells us about another woman who came in to where Jesus was eating with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment and poured the ointment on the head of Jesus. *We don't know her name* but Jesus says he doesn't want us to ever forget what she did for him. Mark also tells us that women were the last to leave Jesus at the cross and the first to be there on Easter morning when Christ rose from the dead. In the Gospel of Mark, women, not the disciples, always model Christian discipleship. In our Gospel lesson, Simon Peter's mother in law is the first woman in the Gospel to model Christian discipleship. Jesus enters her home, her life, heals her, raises her up and she immediately begins serving Christ *and others.*

Mark is telling us that real meaning in *life* isn't achieved by consuming and being served, but by serving Christ and others. *The Christian faith is not a commodity that's marketed to serve us, but a call to service.* Ask yourself, “Do I operate on the assumption that the church fulfills its mission only if it meets *my felt needs*?” Now hopefully our church does meet some of our needs – but that's not the end of it. *If any of our needs are met – they are met in order for us to serve others.*

William Temple use to say that the church is the only organization that exists primarily for those who are outside the church. One of the historical emphasizes of the Presbyterian Church is that *God has chosen us.* And God has chosen us – not just for salvation – but also for service. As we look at the annual reports a little

later, don't ask, "*What has the church done for me, but how has Christ, through the church, given me the opportunity to serve others?*"

We can serve Christ in many ways. Some ways of serving are easy (like putting money in the offering plate); others are difficult (like forgiving someone we don't like). Some forms of service bring honor (like being a board member), others bring reproach (like when we take an unpopular stand because of our faith in Christ). Some ways of serving Christ are suitable to our natural inclinations (like singing in the choir because we love to sing). Other ways of serving are contrary to our natural inclinations (like standing beside someone whose loved one is dying). In some forms of service we may please Christ *and* please ourselves (as participating in a meaningful small group Bible study). In other forms of service we *can't* please Christ except by denying ourselves (like when German Christians hid persecuted Jews in their homes at the risk of their own lives). But however we serve, the power to serve is given us by Christ, who raises us up to serve.

You've heard the story. A man was strolling casually along the ocean shoreline when he heard the cries of someone drowning. He kicked off his shoes, rushed into the surf, swam to a drowning woman, brought her to shore, gave artificial respiration, and restored her life. She was *so* grateful she joined him. Every night they walked the shoreline hoping to rescue drowning men and women. Their numbers grew. Everyone rescued man and woman made a solemn commitment to serve others. But as their numbers grew some said, "Let's build a clubhouse so we can rest when we're not serving. So a clubhouse was built. It was beautiful and comfortable and air conditioned and had all kinds of attractions. But as time went on, most of the rescued people preferred fellowship in the clubhouse to serving on the shoreline. Eventually the people in the clubhouse stopped hearing the cries of drowning people – nor did they care.

Henry Drummond (1851 - 1897), a nineteenth century Presbyterian, once said, "In the pursuit of happiness half the world is on the wrong scent. They think it consists in having and getting, and in being served by others. Happiness is really found in giving and in serving others." Someone else said,

If you want happiness for an hour have a nap.
If you want happiness for a day go fishing.
If you want happiness for a lifetime help someone else.

You have shown your glory, O God, in raising Jesus from the dead. Raise us to new life in him and empower us to serve you. May your words be in our mouths, your strength in our arms, and your love in our hearts, that we may be worthy disciples of Jesus Christ the living Lord. Amen.

Prayers of the People: C

As God's people, called to love one another,
let us pray for the needs of the church,
the whole human family,
and all the world, saying: **Hear our prayer.**

That churches of all traditions,
may discover their unity in Christ
and exercise their gifts in service of all,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That the earth may be freed
from war, famine, and disease,
and the air, soil, and waters cleansed of poison,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That those who govern and maintain peace in every land
may exercise their powers in obedience to your commands,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That you will strengthen this nation to pursue just priorities
so that the races may be reconciled;
the young, educated; and the old, cared for;
the hungry, filled; and the homeless, housed;
and the sick, comforted and healed,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That you will preserve all who live and work
in this city (town, village, community)
in peace and safety,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That you will comfort and empower
those who face any difficulty or trial:
the sick (especially N., N.),
the disabled, the poor, the oppressed,
those who grieve and those in prison,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

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That
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

That you will accept our thanksgiving
for all faithful servants of Christ now at rest,
who, with us, await a new heaven and a new earth,
your everlasting kingdom,
we pray to you, O God:

Hear our prayer.

Merciful God,
as a potter fashions a vessel from humble clay,
you form us into a new creation.

Shape us, day by day,
through the cross of Christ your Son,
until we pray as continually as we breathe
and all our acts are prayer;
through Jesus Christ
and in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we pray.

Amen.