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Pentecost 24B
Peace, Seattle
October 18, 2015
Isaiah 53:4-12, Mark 10:35-45

SERVANTS' HEARTS

Hasna, a Syrian refugee living at the Al Bas camp in Lebanon, is familiar with quilts like these. Her grandmother received one years ago when she fled from Palestine to Syria.

This memory she holds is a stark reminder of the generations-long instability in the region. Still, Hasna says, "I love this blanket. It reminds me of my grandmother."[1]

During the weeks ahead Hasna will wrap it around herself and her children and the quilt will guard them against the bitter cold of winter nights. It will remind her of her grandmother, and will remind her, too, of people beyond the refugee camp—people she will never meet—people with a servant's heart, who invested the time and skill and resources to piece together the quilt and to see that it got to her.

What does it mean to have a servant's heart? What does that look like? These questions are at the heart of our texts today.

In some ways the so-called "servant song" of Isaiah—our first lesson today—seems out of place in mid-October. We're used to hearing it during Holy Week in the run up to Christ's crucifixion.

This image Isaiah paints of a SUFFERING SERVANT a full 5 centuries before Jesus was born, became so compelling in the years after his crucifixion and resurrection that it became an essential template for understanding Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection.

Jesus—the first believers came to say—perfectly embodies the suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks. He is the suffering servant par excellence.

But Jesus was not the first embodiment of Isaiah's prophecy.

It was during the Babylonian exile, ancient Israel's most profound historical and spiritual crisis, that Isaiah first sang this servant song, and the identity of this Servant was wrapped in mystery. Of whom was the prophet speaking? Was it the prophet himself? A king? Or could it be that this Servant was not a particular person but a whole people? Not a solitary individual, but an entire nation?

A new identity and understanding of divine vocation was being forged through these four servant songs laced throughout the second part of the book of Isaiah. God's people as a community were being called to embody a new self-understanding in relation to their own history; in relation to the world.

The paring of Isaiah 53 with Mark 10 today helps us to see the connection between Isaiah's servant and the ministry of Jesus with stark clarity. But the story doesn't end there.

In today's gospel Jesus commands to his apprentices, to not only observe him as he walks the servant path, but to walk it themselves; not only to hear him describe the new paradigm for community life, but to live it, **to embody it.**

[1]Read more about Hasna and the quilt ministry of LWR @ http://lwr.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=dmJXKiOYJgI6G&b=7535491&ct=13233029

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> WHOEVER WANTS TO BE GREAT MUST BE A SERVANT, he tells them. AND WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE SLAVE OF ALL. FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY.

Embodying the servant paradigm is our calling too. Having a servant's heart is where it starts, but then it moves from the heart down the arms to the hands, and from the hands through the fingers and it's translated in all kinds of ways. We're celebrating two of those ways this morning.

The letters we've written to Congress this morning as part of Bread for the World's Offering of Letters campaign,[2] advocating for the continuing strength of the federal nutrition programs for women and children; and the quilts and school kits that grace our worship space today are two specific and visible examples of a servant's heart at work.

On Thursday I joined other pastoral leaders in Bothell for the Bishop's Convocation, where I heard Rev. Barbara Lundblad, who for several decades has been a leading preacher in our church. She was here for the 45th anniversary celebration of the ordination of women in the Lutheran Church… (woohoo!) Her first presentation focused on the still evolving realities that have shaped the experience of women in the church—especially over the past 3½ decades.

Barbara said a lot of things that I want to hold onto—much of it in the category of engaging our imaginations when it comes to reading the Scriptures—**but one comment in particular has been rolling around in my mind ever since.**

The topic at hand was the Tradition's spoken frame for Holy Communion—you hear it each week:
"On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread…"
The frame, the context, leading to the Meal is the betrayal of Jesus by one of his own.

Barbara wondered with us if there might be other possibilities. For example, each of the four gospels contains a story of Jesus being anointed by a woman. In Mark's gospel this act of anointing takes place after Christ's entry into Jerusalem, two days before the Passover.

There, at the home of Simon the leper, a woman—unnamed—enters the dining room and pours oil on Jesus' head as he sits at the table. (Mk 14:3-9)
Through this extravagant anointing, her servant's heart is revealed. Without words the act says "I GET IT JESUS! I UNDERSTAND WHAT BEING A SERVANT IS ABOUT!"

But her understanding goes deeper still. For she comprehends more than any of the other disciples present what is about to happen to him. Jesus says it this way: "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial."

The scene ends with Jesus uttering these words: "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in all the world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." And then it moves straight into a recounting of the Passover meal.

Having invited us to remember this story, Barbara went on to ask a question:
What if, instead of the Eucharistic Meal being framed by a reference to betrayal, it was framed by a reference to this embodied act of loving service and faithfulness?

[2] Read more about Bread for the World's Letters campaign here: http://www.bread.org/offering-letters

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What if, instead of hearing the words:

"On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread and gave thanks…"

we heard something like…

"After his anointing by the woman at Bethany, our Lord Jesus took the bread and gave thanks…"

How might a frame like <u>this</u> shape our understanding and experience of the Communion Meal and the gifts Christ offers us there?

Three times in the middle chapters of Mark, Jesus predicts his own suffering, death and rising, and three times his inner circle fails to grasp what he is saying.

The final prediction comes in the verses just before today's gospel lesson.
What awaits him in Jerusalem, he tells them, is humiliation and death, and after three days, vindication.

These words are still <u>hanging in the air</u>, hovering there like your breath on a cold October morning, when the Zebedee brothers decide that now is a good time to pop their question.

TEACHER, they say, **WE WANT YOU TO GIVE US WHATEVER WE ASK, AND WHAT WE'D LIKE IS... RESERVED SEATS—ONE ON YOUR RIGHT AND ONE ON YOUR LEFT—IN THE KINGDOM. WHAT DO YOU SAY?**

Jesus could have wrung his hands in frustration, but instead he uses the occasion to draw them and the others into a deeper conversation about the meaning and power of servanthood.

Pointing to the Empire's top-down pyramid, he says, THAT'S NOT OUR WAY.
Pointing to the Empire's tactics of violence he says, THAT'S NOT WHO WE ARE.

Jesus' point is NOT that we should steer clear of power at all costs. Rather, he asks us to examine <u>how the power we have is to exercised</u>.

There will always be power dynamics at work in our relationships, in our homes, in our congregations, in our schools and workplaces. The question is: <u>How will we</u>, as people who have been claimed by Christ in baptism and fed at his Table, <u>how will we exercise</u> the power we have? How will we keep it plumbed to a servant's heart?

Being a servant of God is not as much about <u>giving up</u> power as it is putting the power we have to use for the sake of others; for the sake of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. This is the vocation to which our crucified and risen Lord calls us.

By offering his life as ransom he has opened the door to an otherwise dead-end future and given us servants' hearts. And each time we gather here, he invites us to come to the Table and receive bread for the journey.

Our task, though never easy, is simple:

- to treat family member, friend, co-worker, neighbor, stranger, even enemy, as Christ has treated us.

May God's Spirit enable us to do just that.

Amen.