

Whose Servant?

Proper 24, Year B – Mark 10:35-45

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 21, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Well, they're at it again. The last few weeks have gone by in such a rush that I had to actually look it up to be sure, but it was just four weeks ago that the Gospel lesson told the story of the disciples chattering away behind Jesus' back about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God. He *tried* to set them straight. He *tried* to explain his ministry and his mission. He *tried* to tell them that the first would be last, that the last would be first, and that the one who would be greatest must be servant of all. Jesus *tried* to tell them, but here they are, at it again.

I thought about going some other way with this morning's sermon, some other direction so this morning's sermon didn't sound a lot like the one four weeks ago. I thought I might get all professorial on you this morning, and holding forth on the subject of Melchizedek, the ancient priest of God who the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews holds up as the model for Jesus' own priesthood. I thought about picking up where I left off four weeks ago, and expounding at greater length about servant leadership. But as I sat in a rocking chair in Kuttawa this week, and since you seemed to enjoy my story in last week's sermon, I decided that this morning I would just share another story I picked up somewhere.

Once upon a time – because that's how we usually start stories instead of, “Verily, verily...” – once upon a time there was a Great Chief who was very powerful and *very* proud. The Great Chief had won many *great* battles, and had acquired *great* wealth, and had amassed a *great* household, with a *great* many servants. The Great Chief was not only great in his own village, but he was also great in the surrounding lands. The chiefs of the surrounding villages were all related to the Great Chief in some way or another – some were his kin, some had fought in battle alongside him, some owed their prosperity and their position to the Great Chief's great generosity. The Great Chief was great in many, many ways. Especially, though, the Great Chief was great... in his *own* mind and heart.

Each morning, the Great Chief would call for the servants who prepared his hair, and it would be oiled and combed into the intricate style that was reserved for chiefs – with an extra bit that was reserved *only* for the Great Chief. Other servants would apply makeup to the Great Chief's eyes and mouth to make the Great Chief look more fierce, more commanding, more chiefly, and... more *great*. Still other servants would bring out the great cloak, hand-woven from the costliest materials in the village, the great cloak worn by no one but the Great Chief. Finally, another servant would bring out a beautifully ornamented chest, and hold it out for the Great Chief himself to take up the great necklace it contained. The necklace was made by many servants over a great deal of time from the most precious gems and metals, not only from the Great Chief's own village, but from all the surrounding lands. The necklace shone with a radiance partly from its extravagant materials, partly from the wonderful workmanship of the servants who had made it, and partly from the fact that it was the very symbol of the Great Chief's greatness. As the Great Chief placed the necklace on his own shoulders, he seemed to stand even taller, and his chest expanded even fuller, and his chin lifted even higher.

Every day, thus prepared, the Great Chief would walk around his village to see his people – and let them see his *greatness*.

As he would walk on his daily walk, it pleased the Great Chief that all of the people he encountered would bow their heads, or even bow down to the ground, as he approached. There was no rule in the village that people had to do this, but it pleased the Great Chief that they did it

anyway. It secretly pleased him even *more*, that when some thought he had not yet seen them, they would duck away into a doorway or a side lane.

One day during the Great Chief's walk about the village, he came to the home of an old woman who had long been among the servants of his great household. This woman had once been the very servant who cared for the Great Chief's great necklace and brought it to him each day in the beautiful chest. The Great Chief had always found her to be very wise, and had sometimes even listened to her counsel. The woman had grown old in the Great Chief's service and was dismissed from her duties to return to live with her family.

The old woman bowed her head as the Great Chief approached, and the Great Chief smiled to see his servant again. "How is it with you, mother," the Great Chief said, "now that you are no longer in the household of the Great Chief?" "It goes well with me, Great Chief," said the wise old woman, "for now I serve one who is *truly* great."

At first, the Great Chief was surprised to hear such a thing. Then he became greatly *angry*. "What?" bellowed the Great Chief. "Who is this great one? There is *no* one greater than me!"

Again bowing her head, the wise old woman said, "Come to my house tomorrow when the sun is at the highest point in the sky, Great Chief, and I will introduce you to this one who even the Great Chief must serve." The Great Chief hunched his great cloak further onto his great shoulders and huffed, "Very well. I will be here – and we shall *see* who is the greatest." With a swoop of the great cloak and a rattle of the great necklace, the Great Chief turned on his great heels, and stomped straight to his great home.

All night long, the Great Chief brooded about this great one that even the Great Chief must serve, and in the morning, the Great Chief's servants prepared him especially carefully. His servants made up his hair and put on the makeup to make the Great Chief look especially fierce and commanding and great. The servants lifted the great cloak onto the Great Chief's great shoulders. Finally, the Great Chief put on the great necklace of his great power as he reminded himself of all the great things he had done, and all the great things he could do. "There is *no one* greater than me!" the Great Chief repeated over and over to himself as he walked to the old woman's house.

When he reached the house he called out, "Old woman, I am here. It is time. Where is this other chief?" "Come in, come in." the old woman called. When the chief entered the old woman's house, he saw the old woman sitting against the wall with a baby sleeping in a basket beside her. The Great Chief looked around, but there was no one else there. "Where is this great one you told me about yesterday," the Great Chief asked, "the one that I must serve?"

The old woman motioned towards the baby and said, "This is the great one that I now serve." The Great Chief was *not* amused. He shook his finger at the old woman and yelled angrily at her. "What do you mean?" "Don't try to trick me, old woman," the Great Chief bellowed. "This is just a baby!"

Frightened by the great loud, angry voice, the baby started awake and began to cry. The Great Chief became flustered and leaned over the basket to try to shush the child. With all the Great Chief's wild hair and fierce makeup, though, the baby cried even harder. The Great Chief pulled the folds of his beautiful great cloak to the side so that he could kneel beside the basket as he tried to comfort the child. He stroked the baby's cheeks and smoothed its hair. Finally, in desperation, the Great Chief pulled off his great necklace and jingled it in the baby's ears. Gradually the baby stopped crying, and began to watch and listen to the Great Chief's jinglings and cooings and mewings.

The old woman smiled and said, "You see, even you, the Great Chief, had to stoop to care for this little one baby. Do you see, Great Chief, you have become the baby's servant. This is just how the Creator planned it. The Creator did not give you such great strength and such great wealth and so many people who love you so that you could boast about your greatness. The

Creator made you great so that you could help those who are weak, those who are poor, and those who are lonely.

No one is *exactly* sure why, but it is said that from that day on, the Great Chief became *even* greater.

“The Son of Man came,” Jesus said, “not to be served, but to serve.” Whoever wishes to be great among those who follow Christ, he said, “must be servant of all.” Perhaps we all need to think a little bit about what and who we serve – and why.