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Luke 22:21-30

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WHEN SELF INTRUDES

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last Sunday over one million people and forty world leaders marched in Paris in response to the Charlie Hebdo massacre. No sooner was this solidarity march over than the bickering began. Some bickered that President Obama had shown disrespect by not attending himself or sending a more senior official than the ambassador. Others complained that several of the leaders present were from nations with very poor records on journalistic freedom. A couple of the leaders were ridiculed for elbowing their way into the front row so that they could be seen. I say this not to stir any political pot—there's been enough of that already. But this bickering and the images of pushing to the front have been on my mind all week because of today's text.

Our service began with Psalm 133:

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity! (Ps 133:1)**

But how hard it is to dwell in unity. Today we find the disciples bickering at the dinner table about which of them should be regarded as the greatest. Self intruded into their relationships, just as self intruded when those leaders intruded themselves into the front row of the march. So do self and our personal agendas intrude into our relationships with God and with others. It is hard to lay self aside, to be self-forgetful. It is hard to resist the urge to get ourselves noticed.

Jesus has been celebrating Passover with his disciples. During the meal he has redefined the symbols of the bread and the wine around himself; he has reshaped Israel's story around himself. But this was not an exercise in self-promotion, of self-aggrandizement. This was an act of self-giving. The symbols represent costly self-giving love: "This is my body, which is *given for you*... This cup that is *poured out for you* is the new covenant in my blood" (22:19-20).

We come now to the conversation after the meal, while Jesus and the disciples are still reclining around the table. It is clear that the disciples do not understand how self-giving love works, despite all the time they have spent with Jesus. They are still pursuing their own agendas. At the table is one whose personal agenda is to betray his master. But the other disciples also have their own agendas: they are jostling for greatness, trying to put themselves forward.

I. Betrayal

"But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. (Luke 22:21-23 ESV)

Jesus has just shared a meal with his disciples. He has been the host, extending his hospitality to them. They have shared table fellowship, yet one of them is about to betray Jesus, and Jesus knows it. This betrayer has eaten a piece of bread torn from the same loaf and dipped in the same dish. This is much more serious than our con-

cern about double dipping. There is no worse form of betrayal than to betray one with whom you have just shared a meal, one whose hospitality you have just enjoyed.

One of the blackest events in Scottish history is the Massacre of Glencoe (1692). Soldiers of the Campbell clan were ordered to massacre the unsuspecting MacDonalds with whom they had been staying, enjoying highland hospitality. Scottish law at the time had two categories of aggravated murder: "slaughter under trust" and "murder under trust." The fact that the killings took place "under trust" made them much more heinous.

Did Judas know that the chief priests, into whose hands he would betray Jesus, would kill him? Luke has made sure that we, the readers, know this, and that we know that Jesus knows this. Jesus knew the identity of his betrayer but the disciples did not. And so they questioned one another which of them would do this. I suspect it was a little more animated than "they questioned one another." Which of them would be capable of doing this seemingly unthinkable act? Which disciple would betray the master with whom he had spent several years? Who was capable of betraying the trust Jesus had placed in them? Peter still has to learn what he is capable of, that he is capable of denying his master. After the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, reporter Hannah Arendt introduced the phrase "the banality of evil." She observed that Eichmann was a very ordinary person who carried out unspeakable horrors. Professor Zimbardo's prison experiment at Stanford in 1971 reached a similar conclusion: "ordinary" people are capable of terrible things.

Who was responsible for the death of Jesus? Who handed him over to be killed? The New Testament gives several answers. Judas is the one who is consistently called the Betrayer: he it was who handed Jesus over to the chief priests. But others were involved. The chief priests, in turn, delivered Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pilate (Matt 27:2). Pilate, in turn, delivered him back to the will of the Jewish leaders (Luke 23:25). It was an unholy alliance of Jewish and Gentile leaders who actually put him to death. But it was God who handed Jesus over: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32). And it was Jesus who handed himself over: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25). Was it Judas, the chief priests, Pilate, God or Jesus himself? Yes, all five.

At the table with Judas present Jesus said, "the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" Here he balances divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Judas was responsible for his actions, for his complicity in "slaughter under trust," as would be the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities. But this was happening according to God's plan, according to the Scriptures, and according to the submissive will of Jesus. This is a mystery whose depths we cannot plumb.

The disciples would later come to realize that this dichotomy lies at the heart of the gospel message. In his Pentecost sermon Peter accused the crowd:

“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23)

But then he offered grace; even this heinous “murder under trust” can be forgiven:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

2. Greatness

The disciples’ mutual questioning about betrayal led into another discussion:

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

“You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (22:24-30)

Gathered around Jesus at the table, the disciples argued with one another about their status: not simply which of them was the greatest, but which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Each disciple didn’t simply want to be great, but wanted to be known as great. What a ludicrous argument: this is the behavior of boys on the playground. Sadly it is not the first time the disciples have had this argument; they did so before they set out for Jerusalem (9:46). On that occasion Jesus took a child and urged them to receive in his name the weak and powerless like the child.

On this occasion he compares their behavior to Gentile rulers, whose model of leadership is to lord it over their people. The people serve the king, not the king the people. The king can do whatever he likes: he is above the law. Indeed, he is the law (*rex lex*). He has divine right but no responsibility. This is the 800th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, which began to limit the rights of the king, placing him under the law rather than above the law. It was a beginning, but for many more centuries monarchs argued for the divine right of kings.

A second characteristic of pagan leaders is that the big shots, those in power, call themselves “benefactors.” In our society “benefactor” is a noble and honorable title. Wealthy people give a great deal of money to all sorts of good causes, sometimes out of vanity to get their name on a building or on a donors’ board, but usually out of benevolence, a genuine desire to use their resources for good. But in the Roman world benefactors were self-seeking and self-promoting. Ambitious people funded civic projects as a way of climbing up the ladder. They were benefactors not out of selfless generosity but to promote their own standing. They gave with a view to what they would receive in return. Patron–client relationships were fundamental to the functioning of Roman society. These depended on reci-

procity. Both the patron and the client acted in the hope of getting something in return. People sought to move up the ladder, acquiring better and better patrons as they moved up, and offering patronage to those coming up behind them who were their clients. Civic life was a quest for upward mobility, and benefaction was a major element in this quest.

Jesus calls his disciples to a different behavior: “not so with you.” He overturns the order: “let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” In God’s kingdom leadership requires moving down the ladder not up it. Since they are reclining around a table Jesus uses an illustration from the table: those who recline at table are greater than those who serve them dinner. But, despite being the host of the dinner, he is among them as one who serves. Jesus doesn’t waste time arguing about how great he is and how he wants to be regarded as great. He shows his greatness by serving.

In the parable of the unworthy servants (17:7-10) Jesus shows that he understands how the world works: the servants serve the master, and are only doing their job, undeserving of praise. But he also told the parable of the watchful servants (12:35-40), whose master returned from a wedding feast in the middle of the night and served them dinner. This master humbles himself and exalts his servants.

This theme of humbling and exalting is frequent in Luke, beginning with the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise at what God has done: “he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (1:52), which was inspired by Hannah’s song: “he brings low and he exalts” (1 Sam 2:7).

When Jesus was dining at the home of a ruler of the Pharisees, he noticed that the guests chose the places of honor, and told the parable of the wedding feast (14:7-11). When you are invited to a wedding feast, do not sit in the most honorable place lest a more distinguished guest arrive, and the host move you to the lowest place and you are shamed. Instead, start at the bottom and allow the host to move you up to a position of honor. Jesus ends the parable, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (14:11). This is the same conclusion as in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14): the Pharisee who thanked God that he was such a great person, and the tax collector who prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus warned his disciples, “Beware of the scribes...who love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts” (20:46).

Instead of reciprocity in patron–client relationships, Jesus urged selfless giving without expectation of return. Invite to dinner those who will never be able to repay you: the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind (14:13-14). “Lend, expecting nothing in return” (6:35).

It is hard to live this way, because self keeps intruding. Like the disciples we want to be great and we want to be seen to be great. We want to be noticed. We expect reciprocity: we want to be repaid. Self keeps getting in the way; self keeps intruding. Augustine coined the phrase *incurvatus in se*, “curved in on oneself,” to describe our self-focused way of living. But Jesus has given us a different model: *excurvatus ex se*, “curved outwards from self,” a life that is other-focused. “I am among you as the one who serves,” he told his disciples. He “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life” (Mark 10:45). He had shown this self-giving service during that very meal by taking the basin and towel of a servant and washing his disciples’

feet. Then he asked them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?” (John 13:12), and called them to do the same to one another.

Jesus humbled himself and allowed God to exalt him. He **made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant...he humbled himself... Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. (Phil 2:7-9)**

The key to becoming something is to become nothing; the path to becoming someone is to become no one. Jesus emptied himself (NASB), made himself nothing (NIV, ESV), made himself of no reputation (KJV). He did not seek to exalt himself but entrusted himself to God, to his will and to his timing.

This is the life to which we are called, to follow in our Master’s footsteps. Paul gives the above example of Christ to show the sort of life we are to live:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil 2:3-4)

Selfish ambition powered Roman society as it fuels much of contemporary society, especially here in Silicon Valley. But there is no room for selfish ambition in God’s kingdom. Selfish ambition is not a virtue; it is included in several of the New Testament lists of vices (2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:2). What is the cure for selfish ambition? We are to do what Jesus did: humble ourselves before the Lord, submit ourselves to him, and allow him to exalt us:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Pet 5:6-7; cf. Jas 4:7, 10)

Among these anxieties that we are to cast on God are those that foster selfish ambition, self-promotion and self-exaltation. These include the search for significance and the desire to be noticed. We hope that significance and attention will fill the hungry void inside us. But God has not made us to be filled by those things. He has not redeemed us to feed our egos. He has made us to be filled with himself; he alone can satisfy us. “A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.”¹ He has placed us into Christ so that we might live Christ-like lives. If we follow Christ in humbling ourselves under God’s hand then he will exalt us, but it will be “at the proper time.” It is hard to learn to submit ourselves to him “in whose service is perfect freedom.”² And it is very hard to wait for God’s proper time, which ultimately does not come in this life. But we take comfort that God sees and that God knows. We are more concerned that God sees us than that the world sees us in the front row.

Pope Gregory I (590-604) adopted the title “servant of the servants of God” (*servus servorum Dei*), a title still used by popes. Sadly this was a particularly inappropriate title for many of the medieval popes. They were full of selfish ambition and used worldly methods to advance themselves and those under their patronage. But in the current pope, Francis, we see Gregory’s spirit restored. The world has quickly responded to Francis with love, admiration and respect. The world senses that this is how a religious leader ought to be. He was a fitting choice for *Time’s* Person of the Year 2013.

Sadly there is a lot of self in the American church. Pastors pursue a career path to be a senior pastor or have their own church. Pastoral ministry is validated by having one’s own church, or a large church, or successfully completing a large building project. A few months ago Mark Driscoll’s ministry imploded; I hesitate to use the word

“empire” but that is one of the words that has been used to describe his widespread ministry. Many troublesome facts have come to light such as spending \$200,000 to buy one of his books to the top of a *New York Times* best-seller list. Sadly he is not alone in such unseemly behavior. Even more sadly, behavior that would have been viewed with great concern in earlier periods of church history, is now praised in a results-oriented Christian world.

Eugene Peterson writes,

On the assumption of leadership—even modest forays into leadership—possibilities for sin that were previously inaccessible immediately present themselves. And these new possibilities are exceedingly difficult to recognize as sins, for each comes in the form of a virtue...

[I]t is in our virtuous behavior that we are liable to the gravest sins. It is while we are being good that we have the chance of being really bad. It is in this context of being responsible, being obedient, that we most easily substitute our will for God’s will, because it is so easy to suppose that they are identical. It is in the course of being a good pastor that we have the most chance of developing pastoral *hubris*—pride, arrogance, and insensitivity to what Jesus called “the least of these my brethren.”³

We have celebrated communion the past two weeks. I find myself wishing we could take communion again this week, for it is at the communion table that we are reminded of the life to which we are called. After all, Jesus spoke these words immediately after instituting the Lord’s Supper. We lay self aside to come to the table in humility, reminded that all is from Christ, nothing from us: “This is my body, which is *given for you*... This cup that is *poured out for you* is the new covenant in my blood.” He gave himself to us and for us. We come to the table hungry and thirsty in our quest for attention and significance, and leave satisfied in Christ. We come together in communion with one another, observing the body of Christ, not arguing about which of us is to be regarded as the greatest.

The church in Corinth was making a mockery of communion, eating and drinking in an unworthy manner without discerning the body, which I take to mean that they were not observing the horizontal unity between the brothers and sisters. The rich were bringing food to share at their meal but were eating without waiting for the poor to arrive, leaving them to go hungry. They were not caring for the least of them. Paul calls them to self-examination. I don’t think this is lengthy morbid examination of our worthiness before God; the longer we do that the less worthy we will feel, and the less able to come to the table, when it is exactly what we need to do. Rather, this self-examination concerns our behavior to one another. It became very obvious last week that our regular practice in communion has been leaving a good number of you hungry, because we have not offered a gluten-free option. So as to have proper regard for the body we intend from now on that all the bread be gluten-free on those days when we pass the bread.

Christ’s leadership model is servant leadership. Last week I invited our elders, pastors, head deacon, and Women’s Bible Study leaders to serve you communion. I served them first here in the front row not to set them aside as special, but so that they could go and serve you, and so model these verses here.

The path to exaltation is through humiliation. Jesus continues this theme in his next words. He commends his disciples as those who have stayed with him in his trials, suffering shame rather than enjoying honor. There are further trials to come which will be so shameful that the disciples will desert their master. Jesus will shortly warn

Peter that he will abandon him in denial. Because these men have humbly accompanied Jesus on his path to humiliation, he promises to exalt them. Jesus knows that his Father has assigned him a kingdom, but that the path to that kingdom is through the suffering of the Passion: he will be handed over, mocked, shamed, beaten and killed. But at the end of that humiliation the Father will exalt him in resurrection, ascension and enthronement at his right hand, the place of honor. Then what the Father has done for Jesus, Jesus will do for his disciples. Jesus is making a farewell bequest to his disciples, passing on to them what the Father has bequeathed to him, rule in his kingdom. These nobodies! This motley crew of fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, and who knows what else. These are the ones that Jesus assigns to leadership. They are not remotely ready for this yet; they are still arguing about which of them is the greatest. They are still trying to elbow their way to the front. They are still thinking of power in terms of the sword.

Jesus promises these disciples a place at his table in the messianic kingdom. They will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus has been drawing Israel's story onto himself. His body and blood given is the true reality behind the symbolism of the bread and the wine. The apostles are the new leadership of this Israel that is being restored in, through and around Jesus.

The book of Acts describes the beginning of the story of this new leadership in the kingdom. God fills these seemingly insignificant disciples with his Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. They come to understand the scandal of the gospel, and they go forth to proclaim it in Jerusalem, Judea and to the ends of the earth. These disciples follow Jesus in his suffering as most of them suffer martyrdom. Paul finds that he is called to participate in the sufferings of Christ. His pedigree and his great achievements he considers as rubbish against the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is to go down the ladder not up the ladder. It is to allow ourselves to be made humble so that Christ can exalt us in his good time. May God give us the grace and humility not to elbow our way to the front, not to try to get ourselves noticed, not to seek after significance through selfish ambition. Instead, may we entrust ourselves to God, follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, and wait to be exalted at the right time.

1. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 43.

2. Second Collect for Peace, Morning Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer*.

3. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 14, 31.

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