

CONVENTION SERMON
30 October 2005
First Presbyterian Church, Lubbock

“The one who is greatest shall be your servant.”

I don't know about you, but every time this passage appears in the lectionary, I am terribly discomfited. Jesus has a way of making the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day squirm—or at least look bad. Of course, those were words meant to be heard by people 2000 years ago, right? Well, if I know anything about the study of scripture or can reflect on my own experience of reading and studying scripture, this comes right through to me today. Let me re-phrase a bit of this passage to make it more up to date. “These clergy of today preach heavy burdens, calling their people to certain standards, but not helping them when the crush of life beats them down. They love to wear the finest vestments from Almy and Whipple and show off with their knowledge of *Ritual Notes*. They love to be the one invited to say grace at a public gathering and be invited to sit at the head table where they will be seen with the famous and powerful. They love to be called Bishop, or Father, or Mother, or Reverend, or Pastor, or Teacher, as it sets them apart, sets them higher than those they are called to lead. Listen to what they say, but do not do what they do. If you want to be a follower of mine, you must be a servant to all.”

In our culture, in our day, servants are almost a status of another time. We really do not understand this terminology from a deep experiential place. Oh, we might have heard and read about servants, or even seen Masterpiece

Theater where servants are depicted. But most of us have only a long ago vague recollection—if any at all—of what a servant is.

I want to put this into language we all can understand. “If you want to be a follower of mine you must be willing to be a garbage collector, or muck out stalls in the barn, or wait tables for \$2.00 and hour plus tips, or mop floors for less than minimum wage, or direct traffic in pouring rain, or –you fill in the blanks. We actually do have servants all around us, but we don’t use those terms, with the possible exception of “public servant.” Jesus is calling us to put aside our pretensions of what we deserve and what is beneath us. Servanthood is our willingness to be as Christ to everyone we meet, family and friend and stranger alike.

Too often we want to take off on the specifics of not calling anyone Father, or Rabbi, or Teacher and ignore what it is that Jesus is saying. In His day, as in ours, those who think of themselves as leaders often want to be set apart from those they are leading by using titles, uniforms, vestments, or a myriad of other ways that raises the leader above the *hoi polloi*. Throughout his ministry Jesus refused such human adulation that set him apart. Who did he seek out, the rich and famous of His day? Or the poor in spirit and pocketbook. Was he ever unwilling to touch the most unclean of his day, the lepers? Indeed he did mingle with some who were at least middle class, but he always challenged their status and position when it kept them separated from others. You see, the kingdom of Heaven is without those class distinctions, where the followers of Jesus are to be as He. Only hours before his arrest, Jesus wrapped his waist with a towel and began to perform the most base task any house servant could do: he washed the feet of his disciples—his disciples—as a common servant. Then he asks them, “Do you know what I

have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you."

I do not believe that Jesus is worried about which terms we use to separate ourselves from one another—Father, Rabbi, Teacher, Bishop, Pastor, Doctor—but that we do so at all. We who are called to be followers of the Christ cannot set ourselves above others in status or in self-serving. Rather we are to serve, not be served.

This morning we are going to set apart one who has been called by God and this Church to be a Deacon. The prevailing image that is used for this order is that of servant, and with good reason. As we watch what the deacon does within our worship, the reading of the Gospel, the leading of the Intercessions, especially settings and clearing the table—the Altar—before and after our community celebration, these are servant tasks. But all of these tasks are mirrors of what we are all called to be.

Many years ago I heard the Assistant Bishop of Oklahoma, Bill Cox, speak of deacons as "icons" of servanthood. If you are not familiar with what icons are, they are stylized depictions of a saint or an event in Christian history that draw the viewer into that portion the eternal life the saint or event depicts. Bishop Cox always stressed that the service of the deacon is primarily apart from the Sunday ministry of the congregation, although it is mirrored in the tasks they perform at the Altar. He would describe the work we do on Sunday as "in-house" ministry, and then go on to say that deacons are called to the other side of the coin, to "out-house ministry."

The ministry of service of the deacon is not to be THE servant for the congregation or the diocese, but rather to draw us as an icon does into service. If we think Fran will do all of those chores that none of the rest of us want to do, we are sadly mistaken. Fran will be a thorn in our sides as she urges us to seek out the sick and suffering, to look for the homeless and helpless and then put our hands and feet to work meeting their needs. She will encourage, cajole, nag, twist arms, and badger us to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Her job is to model servanthood, in order that we might also be servants.

THE CHARGE

Fran would you please stand. You are about to commit yourself formally to accept the mantle that was cast on your shoulders so long ago. You will make promises and vows that I am sure you know by heart. You will have hands laid on you, you will be vested according to the Order of Deacons, and you will have your hands filled with the Holy Scriptures. In one sense this is your day, and not unlike a wedding, as we have discussed before. And like a wedding, this is not the end but the beginning. At all times you are to stand with one foot at the Altar and the other in the midst of world outside. You must call us to serve those we meet with Christ's hands. Do not let this day so set you apart that you see yourself as above others. Don't let the vestments fool you—you are not above anyone. And.....Never forget that you are the Lord's precious gift to us, and together we can do the impossible.