*“Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:44).”*

A husband and wife visited a medical specialist; he had been ailing alarmingly for quite some time and no one could find what was wrong. After a thorough examination and a battery of tests, the doctor invited the wife into his consultation room. “Your husband’s endocrine system is almost completely shot,” he told her. “It is vital that we restart his hormonal levels, especially his serotonin, endorphins, and his pheromones. He will need your help. Here is your prescription. For the next twelve months you must be his devoted servant: you must cook three delicious meals each day; you must give him constant and total physical and emotional affirmation and affection; you must never offer any criticism or ask for anything for yourself. For one whole year, he will be your king, and you must give up your life to serve his every need.” She returned to her husband, who asked what the doctor said. She replied, “He said that you are going to die.”

It is hard to be a servant; our experience of service depends almost entirely on our motivation. When we serve because we want to—because we love who or what we serve and want to make a gift of ourselves—service is deeply rewarding and, even when challenging, is a lot of fun. But when we serve because we feel we must—either from duty, command, fear, or a desire for a favor in return—service is boring, burdensome, or enraging.

Jesus understands this, which is why—when we hear today’s Gospel reading—it is important that we understand what He is saying and what He is not. The scene opens with an argument among His disciples. James and John ask Jesus that, when He reclaims the earthly crown of King David and restores Israel to a position of worldly independence, wealth, and power—as they believed was His mission and purpose—He would put them in the highest places of His authority where they would enjoy more power than even the rest of the Twelve. When Jesus replies, they do not understand: He tells them that the price to pay for honors in Heaven is to drink from His cup of suffering and to be baptized by dying like Him. When the other disciples hear about James and John’s power move, their outrage tears their fellowship apart. Jesus brings them back together and reminds them that while power in this world is used by tyrants who control those under their authority, true power in His Heavenly Kingdom is revealed through self-giving service. He tells them “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44).”

When we hear this, we might think that Jesus is telling the disciples and us what we need to do; if we really want to become really good Christians, we must continually and deliberately make selfless decisions to serve others. In other words, we tend to think that Jesus’ teaching is about us. This is pretty much what every one of us does all of the time when we read Scripture: we look for a prescription for what we must do. We look for personal lessons that we can apply to our lives and seek practical moral pointers about how we must act to be good and someday become happy. When Jesus is at a dinner party, sees how people scramble to sit in the best seats, and says that it is better to take the lowest seat and be invited a higher one than to take a higher seat and be sent lower, we tend to think He is giving us sage advice about how to avoid public embarrassment. When Jesus tells a Temple story about a Pharisee who offers a prayer of thanksgiving that he is not a sinner, a Publican next to him who simply asks for mercy as a sinner, and the result that the Publican alone left the Temple made right with God, we tend to think that Jesus is giving us sage advice about how to be humble and not cocky. When Jesus places a child among the disciples and says that unless people receive the kingdom of God as a little child they cannot enter it, we tend to think that He is giving us sage advice about our need to become innocent like children.

But the Gospel is not about us: we do not read Scripture with ourselves at the center of the universe. The Gospel is always about Jesus. His commentary about sitting at the lowest seat at a dinner party is about Him: He, the Son of God, descended from Heaven, entered this fallen world, and spent time with lowly sinners so that when He died, was raised, and ascended back to the highest seat in Heaven, we might rise with Him. His story about the Pharisee and the Publican is about Him: He, the King of Justice and Righteousness, embraces, identifies, and spends time with lowly sinners like us who know they need mercy and not the self-proclaimed righteous who do not think they need mercy. His lesson about becoming a child is about Him: He, Who existed from before the beginning of Time, entered into Time as a little child in Bethlehem so that we might be adopted by the Father as His children. The Gospels are always primarily about Jesus; only secondarily—at best—are they about us.

Therefore, when Jesus talks about how those who wish to become great must become the servants of all, He is not giving us a prescription. He is not talking about us; He is talking about Himself. He who is first among us came among us as a servant and even a slave to all. At His Incarnation, He emptied Himself of His of divine glory and power to enter life exactly as we live it and to serve us all by dying for us all. Living a life and dying a death of serving, self-giving love, He Who became human like us has been made the greatest in Heaven, crowned with authority from the Father to raise from the dead all who believe in and follow Him. Jesus has not given us a prescription for what we must do for Him; He gives us a description of what He has done for us. He has not come among us to spur us to action; He has come to confer upon us His divine status as children of the Father through a relationship with Him. Therefore, we are not motivated to try to become like Him; instead, being made like Him by His Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, we are motivated to do what He does and to live as He lives simply because we are grateful to Him. Because He loves us, we are free to love and serve Him and one another not because we need to, not because we need to, but because we want to.

We cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven through our ambition, whether we try to become great or try to become the least or try to become great by trying to be the least. We cannot enter the Kingdom even if our ambition is to stop being such self-centered, self-destructive, self-righteous hypocrites or love-avoidant, truth-avoidant dumpster fires. We cannot cheat our way into the Kingdom of Heaven by trying or by pretending to try to serve others so that we can get Heaven as our service’s compensation. Our motivation for service makes all of the difference in the world. If we are motivated to serve by dry duty, sweaty fear, or desperate ambition, we find only burdensome boredom and frustrated rage. When we are motivated by sheer, honest gratitude for what God has done for us, for how God loves us, for Who the God of love simply is, then service is joy—and a whole lot of fun.