

The Walk: Serve

Psalm 31:14-24

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This past week I had the opportunity to be a mock interviewer for some of the people who are doing ordination interviews. Ordination, in The United Methodist Church, is roughly like writing a pair of dissertations and having to defend them both three years apart, except it's not about your research but you as a person of faith, as a leader, as a potential pastor. It's a lot of work, and it was humbling to remember being in that hot seat from this side of it.

One of the questions that is part of the writing and answering one has to do is how you understand "Jesus as Lord." It's a question that gets increasingly weirder as we move further and further away from any secular notion of lordship. When it was my turn, I—being a nerd—went to the etymological history of it. The English term "lord" comes from the Old English term "hlaford," which literally translates into "bread guardian" or "bread protector." A *hlaford* was someone who held the home space, the safe domain where you could rest and find food and shelter.¹ Given that this was usually the leader of the group or the clan, the one who owned the hearth and invited people to stay in it and offered protection, it eventually morphed into an understanding of the modern English "lord" that has to do with someone who has power over another.

What the modern evolution often misses, however, is that the bread guardian was bound to the people with whom he shared that bread. Anglo-Saxon culture revolved around the idea that hearth and home were safe because the warriors brought home wealth and weapons from raiding, that the lord and his clan—in Old English, often *thanes*—were in mutual connection. Being a *hlaford* meant being in relationship, meant being responsible for the people who were, in a different way, responsible for you. This sense of connection ran so deep that any disloyalty was linguistically tied to it; the Old English word for "treachery" is "hlaford-swice," the betrayal of the bread guardian.²

Over and over in the surviving literature, the concept of "lord" was about caring for the warriors who were part of the clan, and no self-respecting warrior would serve a *hlaford*—or *hlafdige*, the female equivalent—who treated them poorly, cruelly, dismissively. Service was a gift; to serve was not something to be taken lightly, to be expected without any action on the part of the one mostly in charge. A lord may lord, but only because the warriors and others *chose* service rather than overthrowing someone who didn't care about them.

To be fair, there are complications and realities and social strata and all manner of humanity that shift how much choice people had and I can't fit multiple degrees' worth of understanding into this sermon—much to my chagrin—but the point of it is that someone who serves and the one they serve were always meant to be connected. One cannot serve in a

¹ Bosworth, Joseph. "hláford." In *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014. <https://bosworthtoller.com/19179>. See also *Hláfweard, Guardian of the Loaf | Basement Notes* and "Bright's Old English Grammar & Reader" ed. F. J. Cassidy and Richard Ringler (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1971) p. 437.

² Cassidy and Ringler, 437.

vacuum—which matters tremendously as we come to the third week in our series about the practices that help us sustain our faith and find it is about service.

Often, the first thought of “service” in the context of “Christian faith” is that of service to others, usually in a justice sense: serving meals, gathering resources, volunteering. Indeed, Adam Hamilton points out in his book *The Walk* that, “It is impossible to be the kind of Christ-follower Jesus longs for without concern for justice and mercy for the vulnerable, the weak, the marginalized, the poor.”³ He writes, “I’ve known Christians who seemed to believe that all that God wanted from them was to go to church, to pray, to read their Bibles, and to refrain from doing evil. But throughout Scripture we find that God calls us to do good, to practice justice, kindness, and love. When we fail to do these things, our worship and other acts of devotion are worthless to God.”⁴ Over and over again Jesus speaks of the need to serve, showing that the mightiest must be willing to serve just as Jesus washed feet, cared for the hungry, and listened to the poor.⁵

But our English use of “serve” covers so much ground. We serve in justice ministry, sure, but we also serve on committees; we serve communion to each other; we serve coffee, that beloved church gathering drink. These, too, are acts of service; these, too, are connection points in relationship. There may be no lord involved in most of these, but how empty is our service if it is only one direction?

Our justice service is flat if we don’t care about the people whom we serve and allow them to be real to us and us to them; our committee service is boring at best if we don’t trust the chair or our fellow members to see the gifts and struggles we bring to the meetings; our communion is no longer communion if it is an individual endeavor. Even our coffee is all the more bitter if it is given or received without recognition of the humanity involved.

And where do we learn service that is anchored in relationship? From the God Who calls us, always and forever, to connection. The psalm today is one that actually appears in the lectionary—the three-year-long cycle of readings that covers most of the Bible—on Palm Sunday. Jesus speaks some of the first verses (which we didn’t read today) while on the cross. Professor J. Clinton McCann, Jr. writes that, “Psalm 31, along with Psalms 22 and 69, is among the longest and most impressive of the genre known variously as lament, complaint, protest, and/or prayer for help.”⁶

The psalmist over and over again speaks of his *trust* in God. “Let your face shine upon your servant; / save me in your steadfast love. / Do not let me be put to shame, O Lord, / for I call on you”. The whole of this song, this poem is that the psalmist who has served his Lord and knows that his Lord will not forget him. The titles undergird this; where in the NRSVue we have “Do not let me be put to shame, O Lord,” the Hebrew actually uses YHWH, the unspeakable name of God given to Moses from the burning bush.⁷

³ Hamilton, *The Walk* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022), 70.

⁴ Hamilton, 68.

⁵ The washing of the feet episode is one of the strongest examples of direct service in John 13.

⁶ [Commentary on Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary 2014](#)

⁷ [Psalm 31 Interlinear Bible](#)

The English tones *down* how intimate it is that the psalmist calls God *by name* to say I have served You, I am frightened, be here with me. Rev. Dr. Howard Wallace writes, “The theology of this psalm implies that God is responsive to those who call upon God, and that it is in God’s nature to deliver and save God’s people when they are afflicted by illness or enemies, and to hear them when they cry. There is a quiet confidence in God’s love and willingness to help that is at the heart of faith.”⁸

To willingly serve God answers God’s willing protection of, care for, love of us; God’s protection, care, and love willingly answers our freely given service. The cycle continues over and over, binding us together and strengthening us in the promise that we face nothing—not enemies, not fears, not joys, not hopes, not disasters, not triumphs—alone. “O,” cries the psalmist, “O how abundant is your goodness / that you have laid up for those who fear you / and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, / in the sight of everyone!”

From this abundance, we learn the courage to reach out to others. We learn how to sit down with a stranger and remember their name; we learn how to write to a senator and ask for compassion and mercy; we learn how to fight for and walk with those whose voices may not have the same reach as ours; we learn how to share the resources we have and gracefully accept the ones we don’t. We serve, and whether we ever use the language of “lord” and “servant” or not, we create connection and trust within and among us. We grow together, we change together, we hope and love and learn and build the Kingdom of God together because God is Who taught us how.

“What if every person in your congregation were intentional about pursuing just one act of kindness meant to bless someone else each day, or even five acts of kindness each week?” asks Hamilton.⁹ Take it further—what if every person served in such a way that we built a little bit more relationship? What if we learned the name of one person who worked alongside us or picked up a bag of food for Love Thy Neighbor? Or said hello to any of the unhoused people who hang out downtown, just to acknowledge that they are here and human, too? Or wrote a letter to our representatives on behalf of the SNAP funding crisis to say that Christians demand that we feed the hungry, no matter our political leaning? What if we each offered a few hours a month to one of the twelve ministries connected here at First UMC, or to Ozone House or Food Gatherers? What if we decided to connect with one person in the congregation we don’t already know? What if asked one more question on a committee so that we are truly engaged and understood? What if we built relationship, over and over; what if we served like we could trust, like we were changed by the service itself?

It is All Saints weekend in the time of the Church, in which we celebrate those who have gone before to their rest, those who have taught us the faith we are so constantly learning to walk. Think of your own saints in your life; who taught you what service looked like? How? In what ways did you trust them? In what ways did they redirect you to the God Who taught them how? As we welcome new members, how will the Body that is the Church make space for their service, their gifts that they give of that connection and hope?

⁸ Year C Passion Sunday Psalm 31

⁹ Hamilton, 82.

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage,” writes the psalmist. So go out and serve; go, be the people of faith who build relationships; go, for God goes before you, beside you, behind you, always and forever holding you safely as Lord, the One Who loves and gives freely.

Thanks be to God for it. Amen.