

Serving God and Neighbor

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**Sermon Series: A
Community With
Vision**

Matthew 20:20-28

The only character trait Jesus' disciples shared in common was their denseness.

In kindergarten and high school, I learned the value of telling the truth. Holy Scripture has plenty to say about the virtue of truthfulness. Yet, telling the truth doesn't obligate us to tell everyone all the truth all the time. What comes to mind is an old newspaper clipping I saved about a newlywed couple that appeared in a local paper. The editor must have forgotten to proof the column. The article reads: "Married—Miss Sylvia Rhodes and Mr. James Collins at the Baptist Church by Rev. J. Gordon. The bride is a very ordinary town girl, who doesn't know any more about cooking than a jack rabbit and never helped her mother a day in her life. She is no beauty by any means and has a gait like a duck. The groom is an up-to-date loafer. He has been living off his folks at home all his life and isn't worth shucks. It will be a hard life."

I believe the Bible on account of its candor. I am positively inclined toward a book that is transparent about the way it portrays its saints. The early church didn't try to air brush sin from the written record of its heroes. The Bible doesn't curry our favor or tell us what we want to hear.

Jesus must enjoy working with unpromising recruits. There are no scholars or members of the wealthy class among his 12 apprentices. Half of his disciples

are fishermen. Simon the Zealot belongs to a revolutionary political party. Matthew is considered a scoundrel for working as a tax collector. None among the 12 possesses strong leadership abilities. Their resume of their time with Jesus is hardly impressive—Peter denies, Thomas doubts and Judas betrays.

The only character trait Jesus' disciples shared in common was their denseness. "Why are you so dull to believe all that the prophets have told you?" Jesus asks. (Luke 24:25). "How long must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19).

But what makes this story so believable is the very ordinariness of Jesus' disciples. I find it hopeful that Jesus does not choose his followers on the basis of religious pedigree or exemplary behavior.

You want an illustration of their denseness? In the verses which precede our morning lesson, Jesus pulls his 12 disciples aside to announce, "We're going up to Jerusalem. The Son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death. They will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised" (Matthew 20:17-19).

I want you to pay particular attention to the story that immediately follows this pronouncement. Two of Jesus' 12 disciples, brothers James and John together with their

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mother, ask Jesus a favor (20:20). Jesus responds, "What do you want?" Their mother speaks up for her sons. I can totally imagine my mother making such a request. "I'd like one of my Sons to be seated on your right and one on your left in your kingdom." In first century banquet etiquette, the guest of honor was seated in the center at the head table. The second most important guest would be seated on the right while the third most important guest would be seated on the left.

Do you catch the irony here? As Jesus announces his impending doom, two of his disciples are already putting in first dibs for seats of honor in the coming kingdom.

Not surprisingly, Jesus responds, "You don't know what you're asking" (20:22). "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Naively, they answer in the affirmative.

"You will indeed drink my cup," Jesus answers metaphorically. As for seating in the kingdom, let's leave the table assignments to God the Father (20:23).

The remaining ten disciples are indignant with James and John for requesting front row seats in glory (20:24).

Jesus calls a time out to assemble his disciples. "You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be

first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (20:25-28).

According to Jesus, we're not living on this planet simply to consume nonrenewable resources and take up space; we're here to serve God. We've been created for purposes greater than ourselves.

If you are active in this church, you probably recognize this call to servant ministry. We make mention of service every Sunday morning at the close of worship. Every Sunday, I dismiss us with the same benediction, "Now, go from this place to love the Lord and love the people; to serve the Lord and serve the people." Loving and serving God and neighbor is our primary calling. In the words of our Vision Statement, we aspire to be "a joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to love and serve God and neighbor."

Most of us, in our heart of hearts, want to serve God. We want to live and work for purposes greater than ourselves. Our obstacle to serving God is not knowing how and when to serve.

In Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, purpose #4 is: "You are shaped for serving God." Each of us has been given a certain shape to serve God. Warren utilizes the acrostic SHAPE to dramatize the unique way God has created you for service.

"S" stands for spiritual gifts. God lavishes gifts on every Christian. There is nothing we have done

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to earn or deserve these gifts. That's why the Bible calls them "gifts."

There are at least 25 gifts listed in New Testament (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, Romans 12). These gift lists are representative rather than exhaustive of the innumerable ways God gifts people for ministry. Some of these gifts are obviously supernatural, such as the gifts of healing and speaking in tongues, while other gifts are practical demonstrations of the Spirit, such as the gifts of administration and compassion. Some of these gifts are visible and out front, like the gifts of preaching and teaching. Other gifts are less visible and operate behind the scenes, such as the gifts of encouragement and hospitality.

"H" stands for heart. To the Hebrew way of thinking, the heart is the center of a person's soul or essential self. That's why we are enjoined in Scripture to love God with all our hearts—with our whole souls and essential selves.

Heart refers to our passions, motivations and interests. What do you love to do? What drives you? Where does your passion meet the great unmet needs of this world?

"A" stands for ability. We were born with natural talents and abilities. The average person possesses 500 to 700 different skills and abilities. Some of us instinctively work well with our hands. Some of us are good with words. Some of us are good with numbers.

People with different abilities don't share the same passion. Maybe that explains why people who love calculus can't quite understand why people like me couldn't care less.

"P" stands for personality. God must love variety. Look at all the different temperament types God has made. Some of us are introverts; others among us are extroverts. Some of us express our thoughts; others feel deeply about life. Some work well on individual assignments; others work best in teams.

Woodworkers among us know it's easier to work with the grain than against it. God most often works with the grain of our personalities, rather than against the grain.

"E" stands for experiences. God uses our experiences; our education, jobs and relationships to serve his kingdom purposes. God can redeem anything, including our disappointments and pain to help people. Who can help an alcoholic recover better than someone who has fought that demon and found deliverance? Who can help someone overcome bitterness like the one whose anger God has tempered?

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So where do we start? First, ask God to reveal your shape to you. God doesn't want to keep you clueless about your shape. God, who gives to all people, rewards those who diligently seek him.

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Second, experiment with different ministries in the church to determine your shape. Until we become involved in something, we may never know what we can do. If this church is not doing something you want to do, help us launch a new ministry.

Third, take the spiritual gifts inventory on our web site to help acquaint you with your shape. Let me caution you: there's no magic bullet in taking this test, but it may help direct you to the place where you should start.

Fourth, seek out trustworthy Christians who can give you constructive feedback about your shape.

Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists—Newton and Maxwell—from his wall and replaced them with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. He explained it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service. Some of us need to replace the image of success with the image of service.

Where is God calling you to serve? What is the spiritual shape? Your shape, most likely, is the place where God wants you to serve.