

After the Sermon: Thoughts on Dale's Sermon 03/11/2018
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Yesterday, Dale stepped into the pulpit for the first time (in a preaching capacity) since I came in June. It was a wonderful event in its own right, to have continuity not only between old and new preachers, but in the message that Dale and I see at the heart of the Gospel: a new world whose ethos requires a transformative break with the habits and patterns so endemic to the world of our common experience.

Since I've been here several of you have taken the time to tell me about things in my sermons that you thought were interesting or insightful and, occasionally, impactful. So I wanted to take the space today in the bulletin article to do the same for Dale—to highlight some of the best things in a sermon filled with interesting and impactful insights.

The first is the distinction between the Greek word *diakonia* and the Latin word *jurisdiction*. I normally don't like it when preachers talk about Greek or Hebrew or Latin words in the text—even when I'm the one doing it! But, as my own occasional use suggests, it can be illuminating if done properly and Dale did it properly. These are two words for service that have very different connotations. The first is the purview of the household slave of the ancient world who occupies an often undignified and hierarchically low place in society. The second is the purview of the local magistrates who “serve” their communities by their authority. This is such a helpful distinction to make when talking about the ways that Christians are called to serve one another: not through actions that serve to build up our ego and power, but in those in which no such profit could be found—at least not profit that would be recognized in general terms.

The phrase Dale said in this respect caught my eye: “Feet-washing is the revelation of God as God is—a servant” (or something like that, I'm working from memory here) is both profound and illustrative. God did not come in the form of a conquering messiah, nor did he come in the form of a local magistrate with all the dignity and power and privilege such a position entails. Instead God took the form of popular teacher (a position with its own benefits) who then scorns such benefits and assumes the position of a servant—a diakonos—who does the unclean work of touching and washing feet. It is hard to overestimate what a dishonorable position feet-washing is in an ancient world (consider the stigma about feet that prevails in Middle Eastern cultures). This is not a position that grants much power or “greatness” to a person, at least in the eyes of this world. And that leads me to my final observation.

Dale told us that this kind of diakonia service is a very different idea of what greatness consists in. He specifically said that service of this kind goes against “the way we are wired,” which is brilliant! It is to say that however we got this way, we are wired in a certain way—that is, we are naturally inclined—to think and act in certain ways that are often contrary to the kingdom of God that Jesus tells us about in the Gospels. One could say it is unnatural to serve this way—without trying to get something out of it or making it about ourselves rather than those we are serving.

Service of this sort really does go against the grain of how we are wired, which in turn has to do with how our culture is wired in general. It could be said that we live in a culture that defines itself in terms of the cardinal virtue of responsibility. Responsibility is important in its own right, but it becomes problematic when we begin to think of those on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladders of our society as irresponsible. They must be irresponsible, we think, because if they were responsible they would be more like the rest of us respectable citizens. This is a natural way of thinking the way the world goes. But Christ-like service—greatness of person—requires an unnatural, queer way of rejecting that line of reasoning. We are not to be served by the lowest and most undesirable of our communities, but to be their servants. To lower ourselves to the point of indignity so that we might find Christ among the tax collectors and prostitutes and other “sinners” of our modern world.

I am thankful to God for Dale’s sermon that highlighted these points and so many more. We are blessed to have so many capable and insightful people to bring us a Word from God as was illustrated yesterday. May we all become “great” in this unnatural way!