



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Sergeant Jack

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

September 12, 2021

The Rev. Paul McLain

'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

A young second lieutenant in the Vietnam War wanted to impress the troops serving in his platoon. So, he grew a mustache and took up the affectation of smoking cigars because he thought all this would make him look quite dashing and much older than his 22 years. One night he asked Sergeant Jack, his African-American platoon sergeant, to give him some honest feedback about how he could improve his performance. Sergeant Jack looked at him and said, "Well, the first thing, shave off that ridiculous mustache, and quit smoking the cigars – because you look absurd – and be yourself."

The young lieutenant took his advice and began having nightly bull sessions with Sergeant Jack. He learned that Sergeant Jack had grown up on the rough-and-tumble streets of Philadelphia. Sergeant Jack told him the background of each man in the platoon, most of whom grew up in working-class families of steelworkers, truck drivers, domestic service workers, and gas station attendants. Sergeant Jack told him how each young man thought, and for whom or what each of them most cared.

Sergeant Jack showed the lieutenant that the only way to lead this platoon into battle would be for him to understand who they were and what mattered to them, to care about them and their well-being in a genuine way, and to be willing to fight for them and fight alongside them. The young lieutenant was Fred Smith, the founder of our city's largest employer, FedEx. He credits those late-night bull sessions with Sergeant Jack for giving him the mindset of creating a company built around an ethos of servant-leadership.

In our Gospel passage from Mark today, James and John are taking on their affectations of greatness. They are already measuring their seats of heavenly glory, one on the right and one on the left of the throne of Jesus.

Just as Sergeant Jack did for Fred Smith, Jesus brings them back down to earth. He not only teaches them about service in this life, he embodies the role of a servant throughout this conversation. Jesus begins by asking, 'What is it that you want me to do for you?' It is a question we would expect to hear from a server at a counter. It is a question Jesus often asks and we will hear him ask it of a blind man next week. Then, in essence, he warns, 'Be careful what you ask.' Far different from the expectations of James and John, when Jesus does come into his glory on

the cross, the two persons on his right and left are criminals, going through the same excruciating death of crucifixion.

When the other ten hear about James and John jockeying for position and become angry with them, Jesus protects them by calling all the twelve together and uses this as a teaching moment. He tells them that he wants greatness for all of them, but a very different kind of greatness – the greatness of serving others. He tells them, ‘Whoever wishes to be first must be last and must put others first.’

Earlier, Jesus asked James and John, ‘Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ What he was really asking them is: Are you willing to be baptized into the way of the cross – the way of self-giving sacrifice and service for others?

In a few moments (At the 10:30 service), we will baptize Mary Morris Fountain into the Christian faith and life. One of the questions we will ask of her parents, her godparents, and all of us as we renew our Baptismal Covenant is this: ‘Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?’ And we will all answer: ‘I will, with God’s help.’

Mary Morris is blessed with many excellent role models in living out this commitment to serving others, both within her family and throughout this congregation. Most of all, she and all of us are blessed by knowing that Jesus is serving us, serving with us, and serving alongside us every step of that way.

When Fred Smith talks about the founding of FedEx, he usually doesn’t talk about the term paper he wrote at Yale about the business concept, for which he got a C. He usually doesn’t talk about the night he bet the last \$5,000 of company funds in Las Vegas and won \$27,000 to buy fuel and meet payroll. What he does talk about are those late-night bull sessions with Sergeant Jack. Fred calls him ‘the wisest person I ever met.’ He goes on to say about Sergeant Jack, ‘He had wisdom about what people who aren’t officers think and want.’

To Fred, his conversations with Sergeant Jack mark the real founding of FedEx and mark the formation of Fred Smith as a servant-leader. Like a number of buzzwords and phrases in business, the term ‘servant-leadership’ has been bandied about so much that it can seem to lose its meaning. At its heart, it is not just a business philosophy. It is a way of life. As we move forward together as families, as a congregation, as a people, how do we serve each other along the way, and learn that the service we offer each other may be the Way?

During the last 18 months, we have learned that an act of service can be a phone call, a handwritten note, a meal left on a doorstep, a prayer. We have learned how to walk alongside each other, even from a distance. Although Sergeant Jack died in the war, his spirit and wisdom still walk alongside Fred Smith.

Jesus still walks alongside us, cares about us, and implants within each of us a heart that yearns to serve. *Amen.*