

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 4-5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

“Being SJLC: Congregational Serving”

Today, of course, is Super Bowl Sunday with the Patriots and the Giants facing off this evening in Super Bowl XLVI at Indianapolis. People will gather with friends and family to watch the big game, as well as watch the super expensive commercials that cost \$3.5 million for a 30-second slot. Super Bowl Sunday always falls at the height of the flu season. Maybe you’ve already had the crud yourself. Maybe you’ve been fortunate enough to escape it thus far – chills and fever, aching all over with sore throat and congestion, feeling generally miserable. Yuck! Sometimes just hearing this can suddenly make a person feel not well; that’s the power of suggestion. I certainly do not want to speak this into existence so that by the end of the service everybody’s headed home to bed. It’s flu season, so take care of yourself. Get plenty of rest, drink lots of fluids, and wash your hands. Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed with a fever in today’s Gospel lesson; she’s down for the count with the flu. Jesus’ heart of compassion and his serving ministry move him to heal not only Peter’s mother-in-law, but many others **“who were sick or oppressed by demons”** (Mark 1:32). Our Epiphany focus of **Being SJLC: Serving Jesus, Living in Community** today centers on congregational serving. That is the theme for today’s message. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

Thus far in **Being SJLC**, we have looked at how we are baptized into serving – that’s where it all begins for us, as well as how we are called to local serving, life serving, and hunger serving. Our serving in Jesus’ Name takes many different forms. Moved by Jesus’ own example, we also care for those in our congregation who are sick in body, mind, or spirit; whether their illness is short-term or long-term. Cards which are sent; phone calls and visits which are made to the hospital, care center, or home; meals which are delivered; prayers which are lifted up to heaven – all of these are expressions not only of our love and care, but God’s love and care through us. Do not underestimate how important these are not only to the one who is sick, but to his or her family. It is not until we ourselves are on the receiving end of such congregational serving that we understand how important – how life-giving – these acts of loving service really are. Jesus tells us that in visiting the sick, we are actually ministering not just to them, but to our Lord himself (see Matthew 25:36).

Our congregational serving certainly includes ministry to the sick, but many other things as well. On Sunday morning alone a whole lot of serving in Jesus’ Name takes place through worship and learning: lay assistants, acolytes and crucifers, greeters and ushers, altar care and welcome center workers, instrumental and vocal musicians, those who serve through teaching and hospitality. And that’s just Sunday morning alone! There is much, much more serving that happens on the other days. Our congregational serving is grouped around our congregational 4-part vision of **Gather-Disciple-Manage-Invite**. If we were to look at all of the individual serving ministries that fall under each of those four vision elements, we would find literally hundreds of people who are serving in Jesus’ Name. Have you found your place in congregational serving? There is always room for new hands to help. Our Ministry of Equipping is here to help you find your place in serving in our congregation.

Sometimes we grow weary in our serving. Sometimes we may feel like we give, and give, and give until there is nothing left to give. We can become burned out from too much giving, and too little receiving. Where do we find refreshment and encouragement? The Old Testament lesson from Isaiah reminds us: **“Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint”** (Isaiah 40:30-31). Our strength to serve comes not from us, but from the Lord! In today’s Epistle lesson, Paul the apostle uses athletic imagery (appropriate for this Super Bowl Sunday), reminding us that our serving involves discipline. Serving may well involve being equipped and trained by a coach or mentor, someone who is seasoned and well-versed in a serving ministry. We learn that we have to pace ourselves and keep at it, as Paul tells us: **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receive the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”** (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). In the Gospel lesson (Mark 1:29-39) Jesus demonstrates his divinely-appointed servant ministry of healing the sick and casting out demons. He sought time very early in the morning to be with his heavenly Father in prayer – an example for all of us who are engaged in any serving ministry to follow. Jesus’ ministry of preaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons would culminate in his ultimate serving: giving his very life upon the cross for us and for our salvation.

Many years ago when I was in seminary, a wife of one of the professors did sewing work for the seminarians. I had some pants that needed to be hemmed, and so I took them to Mrs. Kuehl. When they were finished and I picked them up, I asked Mrs. Kuehl what I owed her, and she replied, “Nothing.” I felt I had to give her something, and pressed the point with her from several different angles. Finally, rather exasperated with me, she said: “Just be a gracious receiver.” And I have remembered her words ever since. Serving is not just about giving; it’s also about receiving. And that’s what most of us have trouble with. Even when we are in need, we struggle with letting others serve us in Jesus’ Name. It makes us feel beholden to others. In truth, that is what Jesus came to do – to serve us and offer his life as a ransom for us all (see Mark 10:45). Until we learn to be gracious receivers, we do not fully grasp God’s gift of grace – his undeserved love and forgiveness in Jesus. The anthem by the Adult Choir at the 10:45 a.m. service expresses this beautifully in these words:

*Will you let me by your servant, Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to Let you be my servant too.*

May our congregational serving – may all our serving – be both a giving and a receiving that brings glory and praise to our Servant King, Jesus Christ. Amen.