

Message: You Choose – Life or Reality TV

Do you watch reality TV? It’s an interesting phenomena. It’s a central part of entertainment today. There are a ton of options, whether it’s “The Bachelor/Bachelorette” or “Survivor” or “Big Brother” or “Top Chef/Top Gun” or “Forged in Fire” or “Holiday Baking Championships” or “Naked and Afraid” or whatever your favorite may be.

The premise is always the same: there’s a group of people interested in a common goal. They agree to go through a heavily scripted and scrutinized process of elimination, all so one of them can gain the prize. I admit that Esperanza and I have our favorites. But I’m always amazed at what people put themselves through – in full view of a camera crew that’s standing ten feet away!

Is your life like reality TV? For some of us, it may be closer than we realize. We feel like the decks are stacked against us. Post, say or do the wrong thing and “wham!” you’re unfriended, ostracized or even fired for a momentary lapse in judgment. We’re constantly under scrutiny. Our lives at work and at home are heavily scripted. We’re constantly on the run to appointments, rehearsals, practice, events, meetings and deadlines. Through all of that, we swim in a stream of texts, tweets, email, calls, posts and links.

And we do it all on camera. From selfies to videos that go viral, our wins and losses are public. Make a mistake? Watch out, there may be a video that goes viral to thousands or millions of people. Consumerism is making us into people who live to produce content. If people like what you post, you’re popular, successful and can make money. If you don’t produce or people don’t like what you do, you’re a nobody – dismissed and quickly out of sight. Kind of like a contestant who leaves a show.

What does this have to do with Jesus and service? All we have to do is look at our passage for today, Mark 10:35-45. James and John are brothers, sons of Zebedee. They seem to be part of Jesus’ inner circle. After all, Jesus invited them to travel to the top of a mountain with Peter, where they saw Jesus transformed, shining from within, and they heard God’s voice say, “*This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!*” (Mark 9:7). It seems like that would help them see the path, right?

Not so fast. A few days later, James and John decide they want an edge. They make a play for more fame and fortune. They say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Jesus knows what’s up. He sees them trying to play the game. He asks a leading question: “*What do you want me to do for you?*”

The brothers say, “Arrange it so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory - one of us at your right, the other at your left.” They want to sit in the spots where the cool kids sit. They’re after the prize.

Jesus calls them on it, “*You have no idea what you’re asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I’m about to be plunged into?*” Right before this conversation, Jesus was telling them he was going to be captured and put to death for the third time. The brothers aren’t paying attention. They’re focused on their own interests. They want what they want. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

James and John don’t get it. They say, “Sure. Why not?”

Jesus says something surprising then, “*Come to think of it, you will drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that’s not my business. There are other arrangements for that.*”

They don’t realize it, but Jesus is telling the brothers that they will suffer and die. That’s the way of life in the world. They’ll have a seat at the table, but the places of highest honor are already spoken for.

They’re after the wrong prize! *You know what happens next.*

What would you do if you found out that one of your friends was trying to cut in line ahead of you, so they’d get the first choice?

You’d be angry! That’s what happens when the rest of the disciples hear about what James and John did. But Jesus doesn’t let them off the hook, either. In fact, Jesus has to set them straight for the third time!

Jesus calls everyone over - time for a huddle. He settles them down. Jesus says, *“You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That’s what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served - and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage”* (Mark 10:41-45, MSG).

“Most of us struggle from time to time to balance our vanity and ambition with our deep desire to let God’s will be done rather than our own. It’s normal human behavior to want to succeed both in our careers and in our personal lives. The problem occurs when our dreams of glory and fame, or our simple need to have things our way, begin to outweigh our desire to serve others.”¹

One example is what we think about when we come to church. What do we want the pastor or our church to do for us? We express that in different ways. For example,

I want _____. I prefer _____.

I liked it better when _____. I wish someone would _____.

Why can’t _____ just _____?

We want what we want, right? James and John were struggling with this very normal human tendency when they approached Jesus. They want what they want: to ride on Jesus’ coat tail. Or, to say it another way, they want the attention and the prize, but they aren’t interested in what happens behind the scenes. They’re caught up in the reality TV version of life. If you’ll permit me, I’ll push the analogy a bit further.

If Jesus were alive today, what role do you think he would play in a reality TV life? I think he’d always be off camera, working behind the scenes. There’s evidence of that. Jesus was always withdrawing, going off with his team, praying at night in the desert, working in remote areas.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/laity-sunday-2018/laity-sunday-2018-therefore-go-with-hope-through-offering-christ/laity-sunday-2018-preaching-notes>

He only went to cities when there was a specific reason. And he didn't do that to get public attention but to make things right.

Unlike us, Jesus isn't after worldly recognition. He doesn't seek fame or political power. Jesus isn't trying to climb the ladder of success. He isn't even thinking about his personal preferences. What Jesus wants is to teach us a different way of being in the world. He wants us to think not of what we want someone to do for us, but to consider instead what we can do for others. Jesus calls his disciples to radical servanthood. He calls us to show our love by WHO we serve.

Being disciples of Jesus is about focusing on what's best for OTHERS. Jesus calls us to serve all others. He even uses an unpopular word: slave. Jesus is telling us to give up all ideas of what we deserve or have earned. Jesus encourages us to see ourselves as servants to all people. He invites us to lift our eyes up from our own navels so we can see the face of Christ in the people around us, especially those who have very little, those who've been rejected, those who carry heavy burdens, and those who may not share our worldview or beliefs.

Discipleship is characterized by a willingness to serve others, even if it costs us. To take up the cross and follow Jesus means that we willingly put aside our own needs and desires in order to serve. We sacrifice our own safety, comfort, time and money. We put aside our personal preferences in order to offer Christ to the people we encounter every day in our neighborhoods, stores, workplaces, wherever we go, even church. Jesus came into the world to serve, not to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many. That's good news. Jesus showed us how to do live in such a way that we share it in our very being.

Jesus gave us a command, *“love each other just as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). He told us that people would know we are his disciples by the way we love one another.

Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice. He gave his very life to serve all people for all time. Jesus gave his life for us. He gave his life so that you and I could stand firm in the knowledge that even if we make poor choices in this life, Jesus is there. Even if we ask “What's in it for me?” just as often as we ask, “What can I do for you?”, we have the assurance

of salvation. We don't have to serve others in order to claim eternal life because Jesus has already paid the price for us. It's just that we'll feel better and grow more spiritually, practically and have deeper faith when we do.

Dr. Gary Chapman's book, The 5 Love Languages, helps us understand the way service is an act of love. Love is the most important part of relationships – with God, family and friends. Dr. Chapman believes that we express our love and appreciation in five ways: through words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time and physical touch.

Acts of service are part of the covenant made during our baptism and affirmed when we accept Jesus as adults. You might have this love language if your motto is “actions speak louder than words.” This love language expresses itself by doing things that you know others would like. For example, cooking a meal, cleaning up, visiting someone who is sick or homebound, or picking up supplies, are all acts of service. Serving others through church is the same way.

There's a difference between busy-ness and serving in love. There's a spiritual element. What we invest in others requires thought, time, and effort. It's important to serve with positivity and with the other person's ultimate happiness in mind for us to express love. Actions that are done out of obligation and with a negative tone are something else entirely.² I also want to note that there's reciprocity to these acts. If you know someone whose love language is service, the way to love them is to serve. In that way, we all find ourselves engaged in serving in love.

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other” (Matthew 6:24a). Anything that gets in the way of our love of God and others inhibits our ability to give and receive love. Refusing to serve has an impact on our relationships. After all, if one person in a relationship begins to focus their time, energy and passion on something or someone else, the primary relationship will

² <https://cratedwithlove.com/five-love-languages-meaning/> some material drawn from here

soon begin to show signs of stress. No one wants to be in a relationship with someone who doesn't return their love and care, do they?

The question we have to answer is the one Jesus asked Peter: “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). We can respond by looking out for ourselves first, or we can seek to serve others, offering our life as a living sacrifice in union with what Jesus gives us – the ultimate prize: salvation. And ALL of us can have it.

How will you choose to live and serve?

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means we're making the choice to sacrifice for love. It means taking up the cross and following Jesus into a life of service. It's a sacrifice we will want to make. Jesus says his burden is easy, and his yoke is light. It means building a life devoted to loving others as he loved us is not a burden. Jesus promises that through this choice, through our sacrificial living, we will find rest for our souls.

And in a world that defines itself by being self-made, holding up mottos like “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” and “Every one for themselves,” I can't think of anything I'd rather have in this life than rest for my soul.

One final note: service isn't meant to be drudgery. We can serve anyway we want. As Sally and others remind me, “Let's have some fun!” Those who show love through service aren't meant to go around frowning and groaning. If you do, that's not showing love.

“Imagine what people could do for God if they didn't care who got the credit.”³ What would you do and say for Christ if you didn't care that people remembered you did it? When that happens, I believe God is present and already at work, waiting to share the glory with us.

Let us go in peace and serve the Lord!

³ *Op cit., Nouwen*

Let us pray ...

Lord, you humble us with your life and example. We can't image how we would find the courage and strength to voluntarily give up the comforts of home, family and career to serve God. Yet you did. Your way of living challenges us. The path is narrow. It's behind the scenes work. Yet the prize is one we can't earn – life, full life here and now, and life everlasting in heaven. The benefits far outweigh the cost. Give us the faith and strength we need to love you and to love others in this way. Show us that life lived in service is filled with joy, peace and deep contentment. Help us to have fun! We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Joshua 24:14-15 (CEB)

“So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD.”

Mark 10:35-45 (CEB)

James and John, Zebedee’s sons, came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They said, “Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory.”

Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you’re asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said, “You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.”

Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”