

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Following Jesus 101: Serving Compassionately - Part 1  
February 16, 2020  
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Exodus 3:1-12; Philippians 2:1-11

It was a movement that almost failed to launch. It almost failed completely. It didn't fail because the members were afraid to share their story because they were willing to tell anyone what they believed even if they risked their lives doing so. It didn't fail to launch because they didn't have a great cause because they believed that the one they followed was the Son of God, the messiah, the savior of the world, the King of Kings. It wasn't because they weren't empowered because the Spirit was in their midst. Not this movement, called the Way, the early church, almost failed to launch because of a single word ... *doulos*. Their leader had spoken of himself and they continued to speak of him as a *doulos*. And being honest no one would think that someone calling themselves a *doulos* could possibly be God's long-awaited king and messiah. No one would want to follow a *doulos*. Oh, sorry, what's a *doulos*? It is the Greek word for servant or slave. So when Jesus said things like, "I came not to be served, but to serve." Or when he did *doulos*-like things such as washing his followers' feet. Or when Paul says that Jesus gave up heaven in order to be a *doulos*, a slave, few if any people would leap for joy and say, sign me up. To be a *doulos* was demeaning. To be a *doulos* was to be subservient, submissive, menial and barely human. Why would anyone want to follow a *doulos*? Who would ever believe that a *doulos* could be the messiah ... the King ... the savior? No, this was a problem and it almost caused the church to fail from the beginning.

I would like to say that Jesus being a *doulos* is no longer an issue, but I am not sure things have changed much. Jesus being a *doulos* was always and always will be seen by many as the weak point in Christianity. I say this because the church is perfectly fine having a cosmic Christ who rules the universe. It is fine with "Buddy Jesus" who is always sunshine and happiness and two thumbs up. It is even fine to have an angry Jesus; a Jesus who is angry with liberals if you are conservative, or angry with conservatives if you are liberal. But the idea of Jesus being a *doulos*, a servant, has long rubbed against the grain of the church. The church, like all of us, loves a winner. As one pastor in Seattle put it, he could not follow a Jesus that he could beat up. The pastor also regularly wondered aloud about who Jesus could smack down. And speaking of smacking down, there is a church here in Michigan, that holds Mixed Martial Arts tournaments, so people can see the power that real Christians ought to have. What then are we to do with this *doulos* identity? How are we to talk about serving compassionately in this kind of an atmosphere? I would suggest, that what we do, rather than letting society define what it means for Jesus to be a *doulos*, we let the Bible define it. And here is how I believe scripture defines a *doulos* ... a *doulos* is putting compassion into action in order to help people in need themselves. And we can see this in both of our stories this morning.

We begin with the story of the burning bush. The backstory is that the people of God had been in Egypt for four hundred years. For most of that time things had gone well. The people multiplied and prospered. The more they multiplied and prospered, the more the Egyptians feared these foreigners and

so they eventually enslaved them. Then when enslaving them did not slow the Hebrews multiplication and prosperity, the Pharaoh ordered the murder of every boy child. In other words, he ordered the genocide of the Hebrew people. This is where our story picks up. Moses, who has fled Egypt, is hanging with his sheep, sees a bush that is burning, but not burning up. He wanders over to check it out. Suddenly a voice speaks from the bush. The voice identifies itself as the God of Abraham's ancestors. Then we hear these words, and this is God speaking. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt." Observing here is not simply glancing over but means to fully take in what is happening. "I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters." Hearing here does not mean simply receiving sound but means internalizing what was said. "Indeed, I know their sufferings." Notice that God does not say, "I know of their suffering," but "I know their suffering." A better translation would be, "I feel their pain." This is what compassion is; to feel with. God shares in the pain of the people and then out of great compassion, "comes down" and acts. God is not a remote observer of things. God is one who will be with God's people and so God tells Moses that God will deliver God's people from bondage and send them to a land flowing with milk and honey. God is being a servant because God is putting compassion into action, helping the Hebrews do what they cannot do for themselves ... be free.

We see this same pattern working itself out in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. But this time, those who need help are not simply the Hebrew people, it is all of creation; that because all of creation is trapped in the cycle of sin and death there is only one person who can set it free, and that is Jesus. Though the sense of compassion is not as straightforward in this passage as it is in the Exodus text, the vision of Jesus as *doulos* certainly is. What I hope we will note in this hymn of praise that Paul offers is that it reminds us that Jesus chose to be one of us; that no one made Jesus give up his place in the midst of heaven and "come down"; no one commanded him to take up human form. No one commanded him to become a *doulos*. No one forced him to humble himself. This was Jesus' free and gracious choice. I would argue that Jesus came because of his great love for the world; that Jesus saw the suffering of humanity and even of the creation itself, and so was willing to experience a fully human life and death, in order set creation free. This is a demonstration of putting compassion into action, helping humanity, by doing for it what it could not do for itself. This is how Jesus was a *doulos*.

What does this mean for all of us to be *douloi* ... the plural of *doulos* ... well you will have to come back next week to find that out. Today though, here is what I would like for you to do. I would like you to take a moment, perhaps if you want, to close your eyes and think back on your life. Think back to a time when you were in need and then God intervened ... maybe not directly, but sent you the right people, opened the right doors, offered you compassion and presence. And then keep that image in mind this week as you remember that being a *doulos* is at the heart of who God and Jesus are.