

First Presbyterian Church
The Marks of the Church: Serving
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Psaln 22:25-31; Acts 6:1-7

It was a great first church for a seminary student. It was the summer after my first year in seminary and I was fortunate to be invited as the summer pastor for a small Presbyterian Church in western Virginia. The church had about 75 members and I could begin learning the ropes of weekly preaching, teaching, and visiting. After about a month, I noticed that people tended to sit in the same spots every week. There was a group of people who sat on the right side of the church and a group who sat on the left side of the church. Out of curiosity I asked one of the regular attenders if there was a reason they sat on the side they did. The response was interesting. He said that he sat on the newcomers' side, while the long-term members sat on the other side. I then asked him how long he had been in the church. Only about 25 years, he replied. I didn't ask how long the long-term members had been there. But that was one of those powerful lessons on the tribal nature of human beings...that we gravitate toward and gather with those with whom we have something in common.

This tribalism was also at the heart of the issue riling the church in Jerusalem. There were the long-term widows and the new widows, and they were being treated differently. One of the realities in the first century was that many women became widows, and if their children had died and there was no one to care for them. In some cities there was a regular collection taken to feed these women so that they did not starve. Somewhere along the way though, the widows who belonged to the church were left out of the general offering. The church then collected money from its members and distributed it to their widows. The issue however, was that only the long-term widows, meaning those who had grown up in Jerusalem and spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew, were being fed. The newcomer widows who spoke only Greek were being left out because they had no real connection to the members of the church. When this issue was raised for the leaders of the church, they responded by turning the world upside down, by asking some men to become servants.

You may be surprised that I refer to this decision of asking the men listed in the passage to become servants as turning the world upside down. To understand we need to wrap our minds about how radical an action this was.

First, it was turning the world upside down because the early church was asking free men to become servants. Servants were usually not free. They were usually slaves and as such had no agency of their own. And even if they were free servants, they were looked down on by society in general. No one would grow up with the goal of being a servant. Yet here are the leaders of the church asking these men to take on a serving or subservient role in the life of the community.

Second, it was turning the world upside down because these men were being asked to serve women. This was not the way the world was supposed to work. Women were to serve men. Think of all the times Jesus was having meals and it was always the women who served. Even when Peter's mother-in-law was ill and Jesus healed her, she got up and served Jesus and the disciples rather than Peter stepping in to help her out. For men to serve women, especially widows, was a radical departure from the societal norm.

Finally, it was turning the world upside down because not only were these men asked to be servants, and servants to women, they were asked to be servants to women who were outsiders. They were asked to be servants to widows who sat on the wrong side of the church. These women had come to Jerusalem to die in the holy city and knew no one. They had no family connection and so they were outsider newcomers. Why should someone be tasked with taking care of them? Yet this is what those men were asked to do, and they did it. They turned the world upside down with hesitation.

We are not privy to any of the discussions that took place or the mindset of the first deacons, which comes from the word *diakonos*, or servant. We are not sure why these men were chosen. Yet I would argue that they were honored to turn the world upside down because that was what Jesus had done in the upper room before his death. He too had turned the world upside down when he took off his robe, hiked up his shirt, got some water, and washed the feet of the disciples. Jesus, the Messiah, the rabbi, the chosen one, the Son of Man, the Son of God, chose to become a servant. The Apostle Paul would reflect on this in his letter to the church at Philippi when he speaks of Jesus humbling himself not only to become one of us, but to become a servant. In this way Jesus turned the world upside down, or should I say right side up. I say right side up because God's plan was that all should serve and be served. That as the Psalm puts it, "...the poor shall eat and be satisfied and the rich of the earth will feast and worship." There is no mention of the poor serving the rich, but instead it is an image of a world in which all persons share in the work and the riches of God's creation. An outcome that can only happen when people serve one another.

I must admit the older I get the fewer memories of childhood I retain. Yet one of those that is burned into my memory is of one of my first pack meetings as a cub scout. I had on my blue uniform with the blue and gold scarf. I had my pack number on my shoulder where my mother had sewn it. And that night I received this pin, though you in the back probably can't see it, my Bobcat pin. The Bobcat was the first step in becoming a full-fledged cub scout. When the cubmaster pinned on my and my friends, he pinned it upside down. Then he looked at all of us and said, this pin is upside down until you do a good deed as a reminder that scouts are to "do a good turn daily." After that we all sat down with our proud parents and waited for the moment the meeting ended. Then we all ran for the back doors to open them for our parents, thus doing a good deed and getting our pins turned right side up.

As the church we are called to turn the world upside down and right side up by living into our roles as servants, servants of those we know and servants of those we don't know. Of being servants to those who are on our side of the church and those who sit across the aisle. My challenge to you on this day is to ask yourselves this week, what I am doing or what can I do as a servant in order to get my pin, and the world, turned right side up?