

**October 21, 2018**  
**Mark 10:35-45**  
**Rev. Lauren Miller**

It was August 2001 when I first met her on the sidewalk in Wilmington, DE. She was 82, a Holocaust survivor who now survived on a social security income so low she didn't have enough money for food. I was 21, a fresh college graduate ready to change the world.

I was serving through Lutheran Volunteer Corps, a sort of domestic Peace Corps where participants commit to a year of building community, working for justice, and living simply and sustainably. My title at the social service agency where I worked was "food and shelter assistant," which meant that every other Wednesday morning I'd find myself on this sidewalk, with Anna and the others who gathered for the free produce distribution. Folks would start lining up several hours before the truck of fruits and vegetables donated by local supermarkets would arrive, and my job was to stand there with a clipboard and write down their names in order of arrival. By the time the truck rolled in at 11am, there would be over a hundred people in line, and we kept things orderly by serving them in order of my list.

There was a low income senior housing development just down the road and the regulars knew to arrive early, so sometimes even before I got out there at 8am Harold would be there, in his motorized scooter, bragging about how, at 94, he was the oldest one there. Harold claimed that the secret to his longevity was eating a raw onion, like an apple, every morning.

Anna lived in an apartment two floors above Harold, and repeatedly made it clear she was tired of hearing about his onions. After checking in with me she'd stay close, and we'd talk, mostly small talk about the weather. But I liked Anna. I hated that at her age she had to make the trek down the road to stand on the sidewalk for a few hours just to get a small bag of leftover produce that would get her through the next few days. But I was glad I could be there to help, to serve her.

The day after September 11 we had to cancel our food truck, and I wasn't sure how many people would show up the following Wednesday. The world somehow didn't seem safe enough for standing on the sidewalk, and Wilmington's position right between New York and DC made us feel like we were especially vulnerable. But sure enough, right at 8:00, there was Harold, rolling down the sidewalk, and shortly behind him, there was Anna, making her way in her slow and slightly unsteady way. Even when the world is falling apart you still have to eat. I was glad I could be there, to serve them.

Over the next few months, Anna started to open up to me, telling me stories about her life before the war, before she'd had to leave and find her way alone to a new country. Fall turned to winter and we'd stand outside in the cold air, bundled up and shivering, and she'd tell me about life during and right after the war, about other lines she'd had to stand in just to be able to eat, things that she'd tried to forget about but that the 9/11 attacks had opened up inside of her.

She also told me often about the wooden eggs that she would paint in elaborate designs. She loved this Eastern European folk art, and now, sixty years later, her most prized possession were several eggs she'd been able to bring with her from her homeland.

As the war in Afghanistan intensified, her stories about the war scared me, and her too. But I was glad I could be there to help her through the food line, to serve her.

Months passed and before I knew it I was telling Anna that the next Wednesday would be my last. My time of service was over; I would be going to seminary soon. That next week she showed up with tears in her eyes. We stood on the sidewalk and made small talk. When the truck pulled up at 11am, I started moving folks through the line. I called Anna's name and she grabbed my hand. There was something in it, that she handed to me, wrapped in tissue paper. I opened it, and found a beautifully painted wooden egg.

"I can't accept this," I protested. After all, I was there to serve her. She was the one who had nothing and I was the one who was supposed to be giving to her. She had so little and now she wanted to give me this prized work of art?

Anna smiled up at me. "Just let me love you," she said as she patted my cheek. Then she took her small cart and walked toward the truck to receive the misshapen fruit and almost expired bags of lettuce that we were handing out that day.

I stood there, stunned. "Just let me love you," she'd said. Had I been so intent on casting myself as the servant, the one who was there to love and care for them, the ones who needed my help, that I'd refused to give her the opportunity to love and serve me? Had I so glorified my own role as the one who was giving of my time to help the poor that I'd somehow forgotten, or at least diminished, our common humanity? Had I turned my very acts of service into a way to think of myself as separate, and better somehow, than those I was serving? Those words, "Just let me love you," rung in my ears and cut to my heart.

Both Matthew and Mark tell this story about James and John wanting to be glorified in Jesus' kingdom. They tell it slightly differently; in Mark it's the disciples themselves who come to Jesus with their request. In Matthew it's their mom who comes requesting this honor, that the two would sit, one at his left, and one at his right, in his kingdom. Regardless of who actually asked the question Jesus responds the same to the two men, "You do not know what you are asking."

When the other disciples hear of it, they get angry, probably because James and John managed to get to Jesus first with a request for positions that they themselves were also hoping to attain. And why wouldn't the twelve expect a special place in the kingdom? They'd given up everything to follow Jesus. They'd been sent out by him to proclaim the good news. They'd been with Jesus at the feeding of the 5000 and helped distribute food to the poor. Why wouldn't they seek a bit of glory from God for the ways in which they had been serving others?

And I wonder if in doing so they had turned their very acts of service into a way to think of themselves as separate, and better somehow, than those they were serving. I wonder if they so glorified their own role as the one who was giving of their time to help the poor that they'd somehow forgotten, or at least diminished, their common humanity.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" Jesus asks. They are confident, too confident, in their ability to do so. Even though Jesus has told them very clearly three times, including right before this incident, about what was going to happen in Jerusalem—that he will be condemned to death and mocked and flogged and crucified, and raised on the third day—I'm not sure they were really paying attention.

To drink from this cup, to share in this suffering, means letting go of a system of power and privilege that allows us to set ourselves above others. Jesus' death exemplifies this radical renunciation of authority and traditional forms of power. As we hear in Philippians, Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, taking on human form, humbling himself to the point of death on a cross.

But Jesus is more than just an inspiring example for us. The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom. Jesus' death *does* something; it secures a release for those who are captive.

From what does Jesus' death deliver people? In this story, it delivers us from the social and political power that human beings devise to control each other. According to the wider sweep of the gospels, it delivers us from demonic powers that enslave the world, from the sin that holds us captive, from the very power of death itself.

God, through Jesus' death, will free people from captivity, restoring them to membership in the community of God's reign, God's kingdom. And this kingdom will look a little different than what James and John are expecting, I suspect. For in the end the ones who are on Jesus' left and right are the lowly bandits crucified next to him.

Jesus invites his disciples not just to re-imagine but actually to redefine our understanding of power, prestige, status, and leadership. Jesus shows us a way out of the devastating cycle of looking for glory, joy, and peace on the world's terms by teaching and showing us how to receive by giving, how to lead by serving, and how to find our lives by losing them for the sake of the people around us that God loves so much.<sup>1</sup> We are to serve not as a way to build up our own image or confirm our own sense of power but because we are all servants together, servants of The Servant who gave his life to liberate us all.

Serving one another isn't a box we check off a few times a year to prove how good of a Jesus follower we are. It's more like a way of life that the Holy Spirit grows in us when we let go of our need to control and recognize God's saving activity among us, transforming us into a beloved community, where we can eat and drink together around the table of God's grace.

In the midst of our jockeying for power and favor, our attempts to earn our way into God's glory, Jesus cries out, "Just let me love you."

I still have that egg. Every time I look at it I am reminded that it was a Jewish woman who just happened to love elaborately painted eggs who taught me that year what Jesus' love was really all about.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1529>