

A LOVE CALLED SERVICE

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31; Matthew 20: 20-28; 21: 1-11

Fikru runs a shoe repair business downtown. Between the cost of rent and other expenses, he doesn't have much left at the end of the day. But Fikru takes pride in the fact that he has been able to support his family and extended family since they immigrated to Canada from Eritrea some years ago now. Fikru was not always in this business. In Eritrea, he was a professor at the university and his wife a lawyer. Here in Canada, they've had a difficult time transferring their knowledge and skills to a Canadian job market. Fikru's father had been in the shoe repair business. Fikru had learned the trade from his father growing up. This trade was more easily transferable here, and he and his wife Sophia had decided to start a business, so they could help support their children through school and sponsor additional family seeking to emigrate. It hasn't been easy, and Fikru misses engaging students on the intricacies of African politics - his academic specialty. But Fikru is also a happy man who finds fulfillment in his work. His customers are very loyal. Fikru takes pride in serving them with integrity, and he guarantees his work even if he has to keep repairing the same shoes over and over again because customers fail to care for them properly.

Being downtown, though, Fikru also sees things, things that trouble him. He sees people on the street – men, women, youth. How could this be possible in a wealthy country like Canada? He feels particularly bad when it's cold outside. But what can he do? He has little space and little money. One day, Fikru figured it out. He found a little corner in his shop where he set out a plate of goodies, some hot tea and a few blankets. He would keep his door open. He would welcome anyone outside to come in for a while. Fikru would explain to customers who could find it uncomfortable seeing street people lying around, that when he came to Canada, he was helped by so many different people. He was obligated to give something back. Giving was more than a duty. It was a matter of the heart.

One of Fikru's regulars from the street was a man called Jim. It took Fikru a while to recognize Jim now that he was so haggard and unwashed. Jim was once a customer, coming in with his nice shoes, dressed in fine suits, driving a fancy sportscar. How did Jim end up on the street?

Jim had worked hard all his life. Growing up poor, his parents had instilled in him the need to make something of himself and ensure he didn't end up like them. Jim got through school and studied business. He got a good job and rose up the company ranks. He married an attractive woman, bought a big house, had children, drove a fancy car. Everyone admired

Jim and wanted what Jim had. He was successful. He was a star. But Jim had to keep all this afloat. He worked long hours. His wife and children were dependent on the lifestyle. Jim couldn't imagine life without being in the limelight. He fed off of the admiration and envy of others. He needed the praise like a drug. Without all that outward success there was a part of him inside who felt like a scared little boy, a boy who knew where he came from, a boy who was nothing without his big office, nice suits, big house, nice car, pretty wife and admiring family... He was nothing without all that.

Well, eventually, something snapped in Jim. He just couldn't do it anymore. It all came crashing down. He ended up in a hospital psych ward. Was it a nervous breakdown? Was it a stroke of some kind? And what about his family? They tried to be supportive, but the Jim they knew and loved was the rags to riches Jim, the Jim who could do everything and handle anything. Now he couldn't even work. Who was this new Jim? He was no longer able to care for others as he used to. Now he needed the care. His family tried. They really did. But Jim couldn't accept what had happened. He couldn't accept himself in his raw fragility, vulnerability and need. If he wasn't a success, he was a failure, a nobody, not worthy of love. Eventually, his wife took the children and left. His parents tried, but Jim pushed them away. Every time he saw them, he saw their disappointment in him. He was a failure.

So, Jim ended up on the street. He was familiar with the downtown streets. His company building was nearby. He was also familiar with what had been his favourite shoe repair shop. He knew the owner, Fikru. He too had come from poverty, from a whole other country. He had been a somebody there. But here, he was a nobody. A shoe repair business where he barely got by was nothing to write home about. But somehow, Fikru didn't carry the shame of failure like Jim. Somehow, Fikru held his head high. Somehow, for Fikru, serving customers like Jim who were used to be served was not a mark of failure and being at the bottom. Fikru actually made it a vocation, a calling. He seemed so cheerful, happy, fulfilled. How was that possible?

Before I say any more about Fikru and Jim, we need some revelatory insight. We need to understand something more about what Fikru found that Jim was missing. Let's delve into our scripture readings.

Ok. It's Palm Sunday 2000 years ago. Jesus is entering the city. Many have anticipated this moment. They've been longing for a messiah king to come and save them for centuries. The messiah king would gather support from the people - from the leadership all the way down. He would organize and lead a movement toward their liberation from oppression. He would bring about a new day. But kings need to make an impression. They need to make a statement with boldness and bravado. They need to demonstrate to the people that they

can defeat any foreign power that attacks the people even if they be the great Roman empire.

But Jesus doesn't do that. Yes, he comes into the city with much acclaim: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" But everyone is not cheering. There's some turmoil amid the rejoicing. The authorities seem less than thrilled and at odds with this would-be king. And besides that, there are things about Jesus that are not very king-like. Kings come in war horses, with lots of armed soldier supporters, ready to do battle with the enemy. Jesus is coming unarmed, and instead of a warhorse, he's on a donkey. Rather than a show of power, might, and a clenched fist, Jesus is coming in humility with an open hand. What's this about?

Well just before entering the city, we readers are brought into a tense interaction between Jesus and his closest disciples. They're vying with one another for who will get the top jobs in the new kingdom once Jesus becomes king. They even get their family members involved in the campaigning. Have they not ingested the fact that this king will not end up on a throne but on a cross? Have they not understood that what he's come to do is not to build a kingdom where the mark of success is how many people you've got working for you and serving you? It's the other way around. Greatness is in the one doing the serving. Jesus came not to be served but to serve and give his life as the means to a very different kind of liberation from a very different kind of oppression. The greatest enemy is not without but within... Unless hate, contempt, bitterness and indifference within is rooted out, what kind of kingdom can they build that won't be like every other kingdom? But will they buy into Jesus' vision? Will they buy into that kind of inner liberation? Will they buy into the kind of power where serving is more important than being served? We know how this story ends. The people who are somebodies in Jesus' world, the people with the power, are going to reject Jesus' vision and they're going to declare their rejection as forcefully as possible: via crucifixion.

And this brings us straight to the apostle Paul and his message to the Christians of Corinth. The cross is not a symbol of defeat but a symbol of victory. To understand this, however, they must understand how different what counts in the world is from what counts before God. In Paul's words: For the message about the cross is foolishness to the world... but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth... God chose what is low and despised in the world to reduce to nothing those who think they're something... For we serve Christ who became for us in his very humility of service the power of God...

We live in a world where people measure how successful, great and accomplished they are by how much they can buy and how many people serve them... Imagine if we saw service not as a sacrifice, where you have to give the things you want up, but rather service as self-giving that fills you up and gives you your greatest purpose and joy. Jesus is saying that the disease of having to be somebody, having to find your worth and purpose only by having others below you serving you... this disease must be crucified in you... and only then can you rise up to a whole other way of looking at the purpose, meaning and joy of life. To serve is a gift and an opportunity.

Fikru discovered what service meant. It wasn't a sacrifice, but a giving from the heart... Jim is living in a prison he can't seem to get out of... The prison is not in that he's living on the street. The prison is in that he can't accept his vulnerable humanity that makes him like everyone else... Humility is not humiliation. Humility is seeing ourselves in the mirror for who we are and embracing ourselves as we are for all our wondrous imperfection... Service is not a sacrifice of better things. Service is a giving that gives back richer blessings still. Jim, like the Corinthians, wants to forget where he comes from. Paul is saying that instead of being ashamed of where you come from, embrace the God in Jesus coming to meet you not in your success by the world's standards but in your vulnerable humanity. Only out of that place of vulnerability can you love other vulnerable beings as Jesus loves them. And only out of that humility of being real can you serve from the heart as Jesus came to serve. And only out of such loving and serving can you discover a purpose far more precious and fulfilling than reaching the top of whatever ladder your climbing, defeating your competitors whatever you're competing about, or crushing your enemies whatever you're fighting about... Serving is what liberates and fulfills and it must come from a humility that's comfortable with vulnerability and imperfection.

Have you discovered the joy of service? Have you discovered the fulfillment not in how much you have sacrificed for others, but how much you have given, receiving back more still until your life is overflowing abundance? Have you grown in becoming more real, more human and more comfortable in your beautiful imperfection?

Let us pray: In Jesus, O God you came not to be served but to serve and to give yourself fully to us... may we discover the joy in serving and giving out of a place in us that embraces who we are in all our beautiful imperfection... Amen.