

For years, full-service banks could be found across the country. You could walk into any branch to make a deposit, take out some cash, or start the loan process. But banks in recent years have been closing branches in a steady decline. Between 2009 and 2020, the number of branches fell 12%. And in lieu of this trend, many people now turn to online banking for information and assistance. When they need cash, they go to an ATM.

At the same time, people are dining out less at full-service restaurants. As costs rise, people are choosing quick-service restaurants, or they are turning to grocery stores, like Safeway or Haggen, that have hot and cold food bars. A food writer named Laine Doss says that she absolutely loves to eat at full-service restaurants. But she feels dread when the check comes, “imagining that it may or may not be the same as [her] monthly car payment.” For the record, she drives a Kia, not a Mercedes.

Speaking of cars, when was the last time you went to a gas station and had an attendant pump your gas? Until 1964, *all* gas stations were full-service. Now, self-service is the norm, except in New Jersey, where it is illegal to pump your own gas.

Full-service banks, restaurants and gas stations. They offer a variety of necessary or expected services, and their workers are determined to satisfy the desires of their customers. When you enter such an establishment, you expect your needs to be met.

And yet, **is full service the key to happiness?** Not exactly, says Jesus, especially when we find ourselves exploring this morning’s Gospel from Mark. The disciples and their Rabbi are walking on the road, heading up to Jerusalem. Two disciples, sons of Zebedee named James and John, come forward and say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Wow, what a

request! They want Jesus to be a full-service teacher, meeting their needs and satisfying their desires.

Now at first, Jesus plays along with them. He asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” In a way he kind of sounds like a teller at a full-service bank, saying, “How may I help you today?” Or a server at a restaurant, asking, “What can I get you?”

James and John say to him, “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Apparently, the two of them want the most coveted seats in the house, at what some restaurants might call the “display tables.” These are the seats which, quite literally, put you on display. “They are immediately visible to everyone entering,” says the website of a restaurant called Honey Badger. At such a table you are visible, “yet well away from the front door and any draft. ... You see everyone, and everyone sees you.”

James and John want to be seated with Jesus at the display table in the kingdom of God. Maybe they even try to slip him a few shekels to get the best seats. But Jesus says to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

Drink the cup? If we didn’t know that the cup he was talking about meant suffering, we might think, “that sounds delicious,” especially if we are envisioning a heavenly banquet! And to be baptized with the baptism that Christ received? Sure, why not? Baptism sounds good. In fact, most of us here have been splashed with water from a baptismal font and have been sealed with the cross of Christ forever.

Unsurprisingly the two brothers reply, “We are able.” Then Jesus says to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine

to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Jesus offers up a foreshadowing, a prediction, that James and John will suffer just as he will suffer, they will drink the same cup and receive the same baptism. But he goes on to say that he is not the one who will assign the tables in the kingdom of God. Only God prepares the final seating chart.

In his conversation with the two brothers this morning, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the kingdom of God is not a full-service restaurant. You don’t get to make a reservation for the best table, and then have a server meet your needs and satisfy your desires. Not to mention the fact that money, power and status do not put you at a display table, where you can see and be seen. In fact, in today’s story Jesus attaches a very different meaning to “full-service.” And his meaning is the exact opposite of what most of us expect.

Upon hearing the request made by James and John, the 10 other disciples become angry, probably because they feel that the two brothers are trying to get ahead of them in the line to the kingdom of God. And being that there are no cuties, and no way of reserving a spot in that line, Jesus calls the disciples together to straighten them out. He says, “You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a servant of all.”

Jesus’ message for us today is a good reminder that in the kingdoms of this world, power-people are tyrants. They throw around their money, their status and their power, and put themselves on display. But in the kingdom of God, the power people are the servants. Those who wish to be great must devote themselves to serving the people around them.

Jesus turns our idea of full-service completely on its head. In fact, for Christ, full-service does not mean that your needs are met, and your desires are satisfied. No, full-service means that you serve others fully. I can just imagine Jesus saying something very similar to what JFK once said, “Ask not what God can do for you, but what you can do for God.”

American Novelist Anne Lamott admires a friend who picks up litter whenever they go walking together. The woman is 84, short and sturdy, and she puts the small items in a cloth bag attached to her belt. The friend says, “I’m picking up micro litter, bottle caps and bits of wrappers. I try to help where I can.” Wow! You might say that, “trying to help where you can is part of living a ‘full-service life.’”

Lamott also remembers the love and service demonstrated by her mother. When Anne was growing up, her mother showed love and service by “taking modest bouquets and baked goods to comrades in decline. “Some were sunk into cranky dementia, alcoholism, and random disorders,” says Lamott. “But my mom showed up for them. She taught me that service makes me happy.”

And she’s absolutely right! Performing acts of service for others can make us happy! And despite the fact that this world bombards us with the idea that *being served* will make us happy, in the end such happiness is fleeting. True, we may receive a great meal, leave a tip for excellent service, but then the next day we are hungry again. Only serving others can truly give us a satisfaction that lasts.

Lamott says, “We know by a certain age the great palace lies of the culture.” By “great palace lies” she means the lies told to us by our society; that our possessions, achievements, and positions will make us happy. The “palace lies” are what motivate the rulers of the gentiles to lord it over the people of the land. But Lamott knows that it is a lie to believe that if you are able to buy, do, or achieve

certain things, you will be happy and rich. “Nope,” she concludes. “Love and service make us rich.”

I imagine that Jesus agrees with her, 100%. A full-service life is an existence devoted completely to service. Happiness and greatness come not from achievement and wealth, but from trying to help others and by seeking to make the world a better place. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would agree with her as well. He made it a talking point in one of his last sermons preached on this story of James and John and Jesus. “Everybody can be great,” he said, “because anybody can serve.”

Our Lord and Savior wants us to live a **full-service life!** And as we contemplate what that means for us as followers of Christ, we should always keep in mind that acts of service do not necessarily have to be gigantic to be great. In fact, they can be quite small. I know an individual in this congregation, and I don’t even think I need to say the individual’s name, but this person has sent cards to people of our congregation for years encouraging us, wishing us well, and celebrating the joyous occasions of our lives with us.

Showing people that we care for them and love them. That’s the heart of living a full-service life. And while we don’t always receive thanks and praise for doing so, the Holy Spirit reminds us that by helping others in need we are responding to the words of Jesus, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.”

True, full-service banks, restaurants, and gas stations may be going out of style. But not full-service people, who are following the example of Jesus. After all, he did say that he “came not to be served but to serve.” In fact, you could say that the same is true for anyone who wants to find the deep satisfaction that comes from service. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.