

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Customer Service

Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-7, 34-41

The text for today's sermon is this little exchange between Jesus
and the Sons of Zebedee (James and John)
in the Gospel of Mark.

But first a few questions to get us thinking...

Is the church in the business of "Customer Service"?

If we are in the business of customer service, who are the customers?

And what is the product, or service?

And who are the producers and distributors of these goods and services?

A "customer" is defined as

someone who makes use of or receives
the products or services of an individual or organization.

But being a customer in our culture is more than that blasé definition lets on.

You've heard the slogan: "The customer is always right."

What a powerful sense of entitlement!

That puts ME, at the center of the universe.

It entitles ME to certain rights and privileges.

And this understanding is what makes our world go around;

it fuels the forces of competition

and keeps our economy ticking and growing.

It is also this sense of entitlement that makes "customer service"
one of the most stressful and notoriously unfulfilling industries
in which a human being can work.

After all, why does anyone call "Customer Service" –

wouldn't you guess that 9 out of 10 are calling with a *complaint*.

So a perusal of Customer Service titles online includes things like

- ...*Seven Keys to Delivering Great Customer Service...
Even When You Don't Feel Like It!...Even When They Don't Deserve It!*
- *The 10-Step Anti-Stress Campaign for Customer Service Professionals*
- *Yoga at Your Desk: A Guide to Reducing Stress*
- *Training for the Frontline* (for those under fire?)

These titles are evidence that the current American consumer
comes with an attitude that says,

"I'm always right. You exist to serve me. I want what I want when I want it
which is everything, and right now,
or I'll take my business somewhere else as quick
as I can point and click my mouse."

We've been using the word customer for several centuries now. Historically, the word derives from "custom," meaning "habit"; a customer was someone who frequented a particular shop, who made it a habit or custom to purchase goods of the sort the shop sold there rather than elsewhere, and with whom the shopkeeper had to maintain a relationship in order to keep his or her "custom," meaning expected purchases in the future. For example, the shopkeeper remembered the sizes and preferences of his or her customers. We're now advanced to the point that when I go to Amazon.com, I see the titles of 10 books that look really good to me – because they now know what I like. And if I have a question, I don't have to go through a long wait process, I just type my phone number on the customer service page and in 2 seconds flat my phone is ringing and it's an Amazon.com customer service rep. Customer Service is the air we breathe today.

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So it's not surprising that the customer service culture might find its way into the church. It has been argued by more than a few observers that the dominant metaphor for the church in North America is that of a "vendor of religious goods and services." In this metaphor, members of congregations see themselves primarily as consumers, who have "spiritual needs" the church exists to meet. That means the church staff, leaders and volunteers become the "producers" and "distributors" of these religious goods and services. The Gospel, Morals, Healing Prayer, Sacraments, Inspiration, Weddings and Funerals, become "products" which the church delivers. "Spiritual growth" becomes a service to be rendered. So people get in their cars and go church shopping and find the vendor of religious goods and services that most suits their taste. In their heads they might do a quick cost-benefit analysis, to determine if what they get out of church is worth the time and money they put into it. But in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark,

this little exchange between Jesus and James and John
puts the whole Customer Service milieu in an revealing light.

James and John approach Jesus with a request,
a request that

frames their relationship with Jesus in terms of their *wants*,
or what we might call their *perceived needs*, or *felt needs*,
(an important concept in customer service).

Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.
(Isn't that pretty much the attitude of most people
who call the customer service hotline?)

It is rather an audacious request to make of anyone,
let alone Jesus,

assuming they believed him to be the Messiah, the Son of God.

James and John obviously haven't been meditating on Job 38,
in which God says to Job, essentially,

Who do you think you are, to expect that I owe you anything?

James and John are practicing what we call utilitarian religion;

that is, religion that views our relationship with God
as a means to an end,
rather than an end in itself.

Utilitarian religion worships, obeys and serves God

not just because God made us and we belong to God,
and the glory of God makes worship the only appropriate response,
but because we want something in return:

salvation, or blessing, or power, or reward,
or, as in the case of James and John, status and glory.

This had to be one of the lowest of low moments for Jesus
in his relationship with the disciples.

Here he is, on his last road, making his way up to Jerusalem,
having predicted, not once, not twice, but three times (!)
his suffering and death he must face.

Yet here are James and John, giddy and clueless and self-absorbed,
vying for as much glory as they can get
with seemingly *no idea* of the pain that Jesus will soon endure.

They presume to set the agenda for the work that Jesus must do,
as if God's kingdom exists for them.

In making their request they display a pathetic sense of entitlement -
a basic human precursor to our consumer mentality,
ready to accrue as much benefit to themselves as possible.

They are thinking of the many, glorious ways they might be served
by staying close to Jesus.

You do not know what you are asking," Jesus replies.

Belonging to the kingdom is not about what we get for ourselves,

but about what we are willing to give of our selves.
Sharing in the cup and the baptism of Jesus carries a high price,
and turns any cost-benefit analysis on its head.
Once again, we suspect James and John still don't get it
as they readily accept the terms of this agreement.

And we are not all that different from James and John,
when we go church shopping these days, are we?
We ask questions that are just as beside the point:
Do I like the way these people act, or dress, or talk, or sing?
Is the building impressive or magnificent or new or clean?
Are the pews comfortable? (YOU are obviously NOT asking that!)
Is the preacher entertaining, and interesting, or obtuse and dull?
What will this church do for me and for my family?
How does this church minister to my age group?

Now at a basic level, there's nothing wrong with being consumers –
we were created by God to consume in order to live.
We have to eat.

God gave us the plants and the animals for food.
We need shelter from the elements.

God gave us dominion over all the earth, to fill and subdue it.
It is not wrong to enjoy beauty,
or to surround ourselves with beautiful things.

The earth is the Lord's.

The creation is good and meant to be enjoyed by humankind.
To be human is to consume.

It's one thing to consume.

It's another thing to be consumed with consuming,

and that's what it means to be a *consumerist society*

To have all of our existence measured in terms of what I can gain.

To see people in terms of their monetary value,

or their function in getting me what I want.

To put our wants and desires and needs at the center of every equation,
at the center of our world.

But Jesus doesn't call us to be entitled and privileged customers.

Jesus asks us,

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and share in my baptism?

Are you willing to set aside your perceived needs

and join me in a life of serving others

so that I can meet your deepest needs and theirs?

Are you willing to walk with me through suffering,

in order to enter life with me on the other side?

Jesus calls us to be set apart from the ethos of customer service,
so that we can adopt a custom of service.

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

This ran counter to the Gentile understanding of glory in Jesus' day,
and it runs counter to the conventional wisdom of our society.

But if you want to follow Jesus,
his call is unmistakable:

*For the Son of Man come not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for many.*

So what does this mean for you and me

as we live out our lives as followers of Jesus in consumerist America?

It means to find a new orientation within our consumer society;

to be in the world, but not of the world.

Perhaps a good place to start is the attitude with which
we deal with others who work in the marketplace.

Jesus would have us treat them as human beings,
not just as cogs in the wheels of the consumer machine.

We see workers not just as people who are supposed to meet my needs,
or solve my problems, or respect my rights, or honor my privileges,
but as human beings who are caught up
in the same impersonal system that holds all of us captive,
and reduces all of us to figures in the calculation of profit.

We see that person on the other side of the register,
or on the other end of the phone line,
or holding the toolbox or the briefcase or the laptop case,
as one for whom Jesus gave his life
in order that they might be set free.

We see that person as one whose freedom is bound up with our own.

We see that person as one whom we are called to serve
not for a profit motive,
but because he or she is a beloved child of God.

Another thing this means has to do with the way we think of church.

The church is not a dispenser of religious goods and services.

Members of the church ought not to enter the building
with a sense of entitlement, or privilege,
or the expectation of receiving a certain level of customer service.

Members of the church ought not to enter
asking what they are going to receive,
but asking how they might give,
and looking for opportunities to serve in the name of Christ.

In fact, you *are* a customer of the church,
in the original sense of the word,
in that you have made it your *custom*
to frequent this house of worship on Sunday morning.
But in the church, customer service is provided
not just *FOR* the customers - but *BY* the customers.
In the church,
customer service is the shared ministry of those whose custom it is
to serve others in the name of the one
who came not to be served but to serve.

One last pastoral exhortation:

You've heard of the 80/20 rule of organizations, right?
20% of the people do 80% of the work.
If that can be said of the church,
it means 80% of us aren't paying attention.
The disciples in the Gospel stories are notoriously dense
when it comes to understand what Jesus asks of them.
Let's not be that dense.

At least don't let yourself fall into the 80% category.

If you are called to serve in the church,
whether as an officer, a Sunday School teacher,
or in whatever capacity,
think long and hard, and pray diligently about the calling,
and consider it an honor, which it is.

Don't turn it down too easily.

Following Jesus means servanthood;
it means giving time, energy, money – giving yourself for others.

Jesus has given his life to set you free from captivity to
inordinate, excessive concern for yourself.
He has given you a gift that you could never purchase.
You cannot buy or own Jesus;
he has owned you from the beginning of time,
and has come to purchase back your life with his blood.
The product, the good, the service of his kingdom
is your life – now go spend yourself,
and your wealth will be beyond measure.