

PENTECOST 22B – 10/21/18
Servant Leadership
(Mark 10:35-45)

Throughout my entire time in ministry, it has always been my standard practice to *not* “reuse” old sermons; at least not in their original form. Oh, I may recycle some of my favorite stories and illustrations from time to time, and occasionally even “tweak” one of my old sermons to address an entirely new context or situation. But the overall focus or theme of the sermon *itself*; that is, the fundamental message being delivered, is constantly changing because it has to. And that’s simply because it’s always being directed to a different group of people at a different point in time and to a different set of circumstances.

But there is one notable exception, however. It is a sermon that I first gave during my seminary internship in Gibsonburg, Ohio, some 34 years ago now, and that I have repeated once in each and every congregation I have served ever since. So, by my count, this is now the *seventh* time that I have actually delivered some version or variation of this particular sermon. And I have made this exception to my rule about not reusing sermons because this one is near and dear to my heart, and also because it reminds all of us – especially *me* – of “who” and “what” we are called to be when we’re called to be disciples of Jesus Christ...

I first met Norman Menter, forty years ago, in the spring of 1978. At the time, I was in my senior year of college and all but convinced that I wanted to attend seminary in the fall. However, I decided to fly out to Ohio for a visit to the campus, just to be sure.

It wasn’t my first trip to Columbus, though. You see, four years earlier, as a freshman in college, I had attended Capital University, which you may know is also a Lutheran school, located just across the street from the seminary. So I was well acquainted with the

area and to some extent with the seminary itself as well, and this was actually one of the reasons why I was considering returning to Columbus in the first place.

In making arrangements for my visit, the admissions office informed me that they would have someone waiting for me at the airport, and that I didn't have to worry about accommodations, either, because they would simply put me up in one of the seminary's guest rooms and I could take my meals over at Capital's student center, which is where all the single seminary students who lived on campus ate.

Finally, I was told that someone named Norman Menter would be the driver waiting for me at the airport. When I asked how I would know him, the person I was talking to said "not to worry," the airport wasn't all that big and *he* would find *me*.

And sure enough, once I arrived and went to pick up my suitcase, there was an elderly man standing by the luggage carousel holding a sign with a single word – "Seminary" – scribbled on it. He was short (he stood maybe up to my shoulders) and slight of build, wore glasses, and what little hair was left on his head was thinning and snow white in color. He was also wearing what I eventually discovered was his normal attire: a short-sleeved white dress shirt, a thin blue tie and matching blue dress pants with black shoes. His clothing was neat and well-kept, but certainly not expensive. In fact, the items looked like they had all been purchased off the rack at Sears or J.C. Penney's. (And I know this because that's where my own clothes usually came from as well!)

The only time he wore something different, I learned later, was in winter when, as a concession to the cold weather, he added the blue suit coat that went with the pants. And only when it rained, or the temperature hit single digits, would he ever don a rain slicker or overcoat. Otherwise, it was always the same – as near as I could

tell – short-sleeved white shirt, thin blue tie, blue dress pants and black shoes.

Well, we kind of spotted each other immediately; for me, his sign of course was a dead giveaway; while, for him, I think I must have had “prospective seminary student” written all over me. He quickly showed me to his car, *insisting* that he put my over-sized suitcase into the trunk himself, and we then enjoyed some small-talk during the pleasant 15 minute drive back to the seminary.

I don't remember much *about* that first conversation. But I *do* remember him bemoaning all the road repairs that were going on around town after a particularly harsh winter, and then advising me on the best way to remove any fresh asphalt from your car that had been kicked up while driving on a freshly-paved road. (A bit of advice I've long since forgotten unfortunately.)

Once we arrived at the seminary, he briefly stopped by a utility closet in one of the main hallways to pick up a stack of clean towels and sheets, and then took me across the courtyard to one of the dorms, and showed me my guest room up on the third floor. Once he had me situated, he then took me back into the main building for my appointment with the academic dean, Dr. Ted Liefeld. And thus ended my first encounter with Norman Menter. (As it turned out, he was running some sort of errand when I needed a ride back to the airport for my return flight the next day, so a student took me back over instead.)

Right from the beginning, though, I kind of got the impression that Norman Menter was sort of a “go-fer” around the seminary, probably a retired gentleman from the community, I figured, who just wanted to stay active. You know, one of those faithful individuals that every church organization seems to attract; just a “regular guy” who wanted to simply find a way to help out and serve in his later years.

Several months later, when I returned to the seminary as an incoming student, I encountered Norman Menter once again. At the end of a long registration table where we discovered our room assignments and also signed-up for our classes, he sat alone with a map of the parking lots on campus in front of him, ready to assign us to our parking spaces and issue the decals for our vehicles. He was still the soft-spoken, unassuming man I remembered, and it was kind of reassuring to see that he was still finding a way to stay active in his retirement and also serve the seminary community at the same time.

I remember finally asking someone, purely out of curiosity, *about* Norman Menter, and all I got back was that he was the “unofficial assistant” to Dr. Fred Meuser, the seminary president, which is what I had already pretty-much surmised on my own. But if this was the case, he certainly had a far-ranging job description. Because his duties, near as I could tell, in addition to taxiing people back and forth from the airport, assigning visitors to their guest rooms on campus (including making up the beds before they arrived and stripping them down after they left), and being in charge of the vehicle assignments for the seminary parking lots, *also* seemed to include just about every other odd job you could possibly imagine.

In fact, as the weeks went by, I observed that he actually did a little bit of everything, including troubleshooting maintenance problems when they arose, even though the seminary *had* a facility manager and several others on staff as well to handle these kinds of issues.

So the thought even occurred to me that, perhaps, Norman Menter was a retired electrician or plumber and *that's* why he was always so willing to “chip-in.” On the other hand, maybe he was a retired school teacher, I thought. Because there was something about his appearance and bearing that also made me think of *that* possibility as well.

Coincidentally, I ended up rooming that first year on the third floor of the same dorm, directly across the hall from the same guest room that I had stayed in the previous spring during my visit. And since it was still being used as a guest room, I would occasionally see Norman Menter in the hallway, whenever a prospective student or visiting dignitary was in town. On those occasions when the guest happened to be female, he would always seek out my roommate or me, just to be sure that we were aware of this since the bathroom on our floor didn't have a lock on the door.

On one such occasion, while we were both in class when Norman came by, we found a note, instead, slipped under our door. It read, "Gentlemen, there is a young lady in 301 across the hall tonight. Please watch any *double exposures*." I still have that note and, in fact, just found it again while unpacking my office. And I plan on framing it and hanging it on the wall for reasons that will become apparent to you by the end of this sermon...

And, then, several months into that first year, I was sitting in the chapel one Wednesday morning with the rest of the student body after worship, and Dr. Meuser, our president, stood up to say that he was pleased to announce that the seminary's board of directors had approved a campaign to raise money to endow a new faculty position. (For those of you who may not know what this means, as I didn't at first, it refers to providing the kind of financial resources that will support the salary and research needs of a member of a university or graduate school faculty.) In this case, the new position at the seminary was going to be called the "*Norman A. Menter Chair of Pastoral Theology*."

And with that, everyone in the chapel applauded and turned around to look at the rear of the room where a short, slight, white-haired old gentleman stood quietly against the back wall. Apparently *this* Norman Menter, and the Norman Menter *I* knew were one-and-the-same!

At first I was stunned, and my mind immediately started racing. Why, on earth, would you endow a faculty chair in honor of a retired electrician or plumber; or perhaps a school teacher? It just didn't make any sense to me at the time.

So now I renewed, in earnest, my investigation into the *true identity* of this mild-mannered, rather ordinary-looking old gentleman that the seminary wanted to name a faculty position in pastoral theology after. And this time it didn't take very long for me to get the "scoop" on Norman Menter since the entire seminary community was now buzzing with the exciting news of this honor that was about to be bestowed on him.

It turns out, as you might have guessed, that Norman Menter was *not* a retired electrician, or plumber, or school teacher, or anything *else* I might have imagined. Oh, he was retired all right. (But that's about the *only* thing I had gotten correct!)

It seems that he was a retired pastor, which, of course, makes perfect sense. But not just *any* retired pastor, either. Rather he was *Dr.* Norman Menter, the former senior pastor of one of the largest congregations in the state, also the former and longtime president (now we call them "bishops") of the Michigan District of the American Lutheran Church (one of the predecessor church bodies that merged to create our present-day ELCA), and *even* a former *Vice President* of the *entire* ALC. In other words, this was no ordinary pastor, or individual. This was a well known and well respected leader in the Lutheran Church; not only in *this* part of the country, but nationally, even internationally as well! Respected *enough*, that his admirers chose to honor his faithful years of service in ministry by endowing a faculty position at the seminary in his name.

To be perfectly honest, this discovery was truly mind-boggling for me. Because there was absolutely *nothing* about this man's outward appearance, or demeanor, or the way in which he spoke or interacted with you that would ever give you even the *slightest* hint or clue that he was such an accomplished person. He was so ordinary and average, and obviously quite modest as well.

In other words, I simply could not reconcile in my mind the image of the little, old man who was always running around the seminary campus, with his arms full of sheets and towels, and pitching in wherever needed... with someone so famous and respected. It just didn't add up. Every important, or semi-important person, I had ever met – including most of the professors on our faculty, I might add – let you know in no uncertain terms that they *were* important! And that certain things, like shoveling snow or running errands, were clearly *beneath* them.

Nor could I even *begin* to imagine a former bishop making up guest beds like an ordinary maid, or driving prospective students back and forth from the airport like your typical taxi driver. It just didn't make any sense...

Until I began to learn about the concept of “servant leadership,” that is. Early in my seminary studies, you see, we were taught that the call to pastoral ministry, indeed the call of *all* the baptized, was a call to servanthood. The *kind* of servanthood epitomized by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In our gospel this morning, two of the disciples, the brothers James and John, approached Jesus with a request; a request that doesn't seem all that out of the ordinary, especially in our own day and age. The request was simply this: Can we sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left, when you come into your glory? In other words, they wanted to be seated in positions of honor.

As leaders who got in on the “ground floor” of Jesus’ movement, so to speak, it only seems natural that they would want to *reap* the benefits. There was just one problem, however. Jesus wasn’t *about* glory; not even for himself. As our second reading noted this morning, “Christ did *not* glorify himself...”

And so Jesus said: You have no idea what you’re asking. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (In saying this, of course, Jesus was foreshadowing his own suffering and death.)

“We’re able!” the two brothers eagerly responded. To which Jesus noted that this would be so, “But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant...”

Well, upon hearing all of this, the others disciples, we are told, began to be angry with James and John. The text doesn’t say why, but I’d be willing to bet that it was because James and John *beat them to the punch*, so to speak, in asking for positions of honor in Jesus’ kingdom, and *not* because the others actually saw anything *wrong* with such a request.

Sensing that his closest followers were getting off-track here and missing the point, Jesus called them all together and said, in effect: Seeking honor may be normal among the Gentiles.... “But it is *not so* among you (that is, his disciples); but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to *be* served but *to* serve, and to give his life (as) a ransom for many.” That is, the call of *every* Christian, including and *especially* the leaders among us, is a call to servanthood. To lower ourselves and to serve others in any way we can.

The Apostle Paul, perhaps, put it best when he wrote in his letter to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but

in humility regard others as *better* than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Now I was soon to learn at seminary that everyone on the faculty and in the seminary administration certainly *believed in* and *talked about* servanthood. And I am sure that they also did their best to follow our Lord's example as well. But only *one person* truly lived it out (in my estimation, at least), and that was Norman Menter; the towel-carrying "go-fer" and taxi driver, who just *happened* to also be a former bishop. No one else even came close.

Now there were perhaps those who could describe and articulate the *concept* of servant leadership far better than he ever could, I suppose. But Dr. Menter let his life and his actions speak for themselves, and they spoke vividly. Indeed, they spoke volumes...

And while I have, admittedly, told his story many times before, as much for my own benefit as that of the congregations I was serving, a few years ago I took it one step further. I actually "Googled" the name Norman A. Menter, and the variation, *Dr. Norman Menter*, and, between the two, I got five "hits."

Of course, at Trinity Lutheran Seminary's web site you can find mention of the "Norman A. Menter Chair in Pastoral Theology" as well as the former and current faculty members who occupy it. And Capital University's web site makes mention of the "Dr. and Mrs. Norman Menter *scholarship*" which was established by

Norman and Phoebe Menter “to reflect their deep and abiding belief in the work of Capital University.”

And two of the “other” hits were links to congregational web sites that described, in their histories, the role played by Dr. Menter while he served as president, or bishop, of the old Michigan District of the ALC.

Faith Lutheran Church in Saginaw, Michigan, for instance, recalls how, on October 1, 1950, Dr. Menter had dedicated the former garage which had been converted into their very first meeting space. And Trinity Lutheran Church, in Delta, Ohio, notes that, 15 years later in 1965 (obviously Dr. Menter was still serving as district president!), when they decided to leave the Missouri Synod and join the ALC, that Dr. Menter was the one they contacted, and the one who subsequently helped them make this transition.

The *final* link was interesting, however. It took me to a “free” entry at “Ancestry.com” and a listing of the name “Norman A. Menter” from the 1930 U.S. Census. Since *this* Norman Menter’s wife’s name was *also* Phoebe, and in 1930 they were residing in Wayne, Michigan (a suburb of Detroit), I was pretty confident that it was the same one. But the interesting thing for me was the date of birth that was listed... 1898. Which means, of course, that when I first met Dr. Menter, some 40 years ago, he was *already* 80 years old (!), but still working fulltime as the “unofficial” assistant to the seminary’s president and “official” go-fer for the seminary community. At an age when most people, including most *pastors*, are living in places like Florida or Arizona, and playing golf and otherwise taking it easy, Norman Menter was showing up for work at the seminary, Monday through Friday, in good weather and bad, and on weekends as needed, ready and willing to do anything and *everything* they had for him to do. Talk about servanthood!

After I graduated from seminary and moved away, I didn't hear anything more about Dr. Menter for a few years, until one day I read his obituary in an issue of *The Lutheran* magazine (now known as *Living Lutheran*). It seems that his wife, Phoebe, preceded him in death, and that Dr. Menter, himself, eventually ended up living in a Lutheran nursing home in Columbus, not all that far from the seminary actually. And not content to just sit around, even in *that* environment, he apparently continued to serve at the nursing home, volunteering as a chaplain's assistant and helping out wherever he could, especially taking communion to the other residents, until he was well into his 90's!

Obviously, Norman Menter knew *precisely* what our Lord was talking about when Jesus said that those who wish to become *great* must first become a *servant*. For Dr. Menter truly *was* a servant leader. And for that, this otherwise short and slight man, who looked so average, so ordinary, nevertheless stands as a *giant* for *all those* who aspire to be disciples of Jesus Christ in their own lives.

Amen.