Next Sunday will mark the 24th anniversary of my graduation from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. A lot has changed in those years in my life, in my career, in the culinary world and the restaurant industry as a whole. The culinary profession and its culture have become so popular in the last several years that it is hard to keep track of. How many people here are now familiar with Sriracha and use it instead of ketchup? Do most of you know what charcuterie is now? Do you sometimes struggle to decide whether to use Parmesan, Asiago or Romano in a dish. How many of you now use kosher or sea salt instead of regular iodized table salt in your cooking? These are just a few examples of items and ingredients that were mostly unknown or unused outside the professional kitchen and yet are now everywhere and common place. What is the next Quinoa?

The general public’s familiarity with culinary things has made my life easier because ingredients that used to be considered exotic aren’t anymore and are much more readily available when I’m cooking at home. However, what I have also noticed is that the level of service and quality in the restaurant and foodservice business has declined as more and more restaurants open and compete to make a name for themselves by being the most clever or innovative or in vogue, often at the expense of quality and execution. The reason that I bring this up though, is that there seem to be too many people who are jumping into the fray because they think the culinary world looks glamorous and is an easy way to make a name for themselves. With the advent of the multitude of celebrity chefs on TV and in the media the world of the professional chef is often portrayed easy, fun and lucrative; they seem like a new type of Rock-star! What is lacking however is the underlying premise that service is the key part of the foodservice world: everything else revolves around it. Without a key focus on the customer and their needs and desires, a grilled cheese sandwich is still a grilled cheese sandwich even if it made with fig compote, pancetta and piavé cheese on artisanal Tuscan bread.

My point and the point of this gospel today is that we often put too much emphasis on making a name for ourselves that we forget what we are here to do and that is to serve others. Service is our Mission and purpose; not merely the means to an end. What I mean is that we are called to serve others for the sake of helping others; we don’t serve others simple for reward or as a means for some other purpose or material gain.

James and John, in our gospel today ask to sit, one on Jesus’ right and the other on his left when Jesus comes into his glory. Now, Jesus just told them of his impending death for the third time in the passage preceding this one. James and John though, seem more concerned with their place of prominence and status that they totally overlooked and disregarded everything Jesus taught them up to this point and what their mission is. They have failed to consider what was going to happen to Jesus in order for him to enter into his glory. In addition, they left Peter out of their plan altogether; Peter was the third part of the inner circle that was with Jesus at key parts of his ministry like the Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane. They attempt to usurp Peter for their own gain. This doesn’t sound very apostolic does it? As a result the other ten apostles “became indignant at James and John,” and rightly so. So Jesus then tells them very plainly that, “the greatest among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first
“among you will be the slave of all.” In other words, nothing will take the place of hard work, sacrifice and service to others.

This Gospel is very appropriate for today because today is also Mission Sunday. Today we as a Church are asked to think about how we serve Christ and others by bringing the Gospel out into the world. We often think of mission work as being done in another part of the world by people specially called and sent to do it, and that is true but it is not exclusively true. Mission work is to be done anywhere where the work of Christ is lacking and anywhere where the Church’s presence seems absent, including and especially in our own country. It is an active endeavor. The Church is not meant to exist in the world in the hopes that the world MIGHT find it; the Church is IN the world to GO OUT and GATHER its inhabitants together in the Truth of Christ. We are a missionary Church; a pilgrim Church whose journey will not cease until its mission is complete. Through our baptism we also are called to drink the cup that Jesus drinks, by continuing his work. We must not hope and pray that Jesus will spare us from the hard work and service necessary to undertake this missionary work of service. If we do, we too run the risk of overlooking and disregarding everything Jesus taught us up to this point and what our mission really is. Rather we should pray and hope that Christ will give us courage and strengthen us for the hard work ahead of us whether it is in the impoverished mountains of Appalachia; or the strung out streets of the inner city where hope seems elusive. We must be willing to serve in one way or another.

Mission work though, is also necessary in the affluent parts of our country and in our suburbs; in Hollywood, in Washington and in Westerville; wherever Christ is being shut out and wherever the Church is not welcome. We must look beyond our own status in the kingdom of God in order to help those who struggle with faith or don’t feel that life beyond this world is important.

The message of the Gospel today and the purpose of Mission Sunday is the same: prominence in Christ’s glory is attained through the way we serve others. We must make the needs of others important to us and focus on others as though they are our customers, per se. Over these many years I have learned that a truly successful chef and restauranteur must not only have spectacular food, executed well but they better serve it in a way that truly shows they understand and care about those they serve. And though he was not a chef, Jesus understood this in a deep, deep way and gave us the best and most important meal of all time, WILLINGLY prepared and served for each of us with great sacrifice and out of Love so that each of us might have a place of prominence in His glory. Heaven is not meant to be a table for two, but a banquet and a table for all.