

March 2, 2008
Lent 4

"The Greatest in God's Kingdom"

MATTHEW 20:17-28

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

They are called "helicopter parents." They hover over their children not just at the soccer games or through high school, but even into college. They are the ones who convince the dorm supervisor to give their freshman son or daughter a better room. They are the ones who write the essays when the kids come home on weekends. They are the ones who call the college professor and complain about a "C" instead of a "B." They are the ones who even call the human resource department to complain when their son was turned down for a job. The more militant helicopter parents have even been dubbed "Blackhawks." They will do anything to advance their children and make sure they are at the head of the herd.

Before us this morning we have a mother whom we might call a "helicopter parent." Her name was Salome, the mother of James and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples. She is not ashamed to bow down before Jesus and ask him to give her boys the highest positions in the kingdom of God, with one son on the right and the other on the left of Jesus. So egregious was this request that it infuriated the other disciples and led to numerous discussions and arguments over who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What do you want for your children when it comes to the kingdom of God? What do you want for yourself, your husband or wife, or the members of your congregation? What we want is what Jesus wants. Jesus wants us to serve others in his kingdom the way he served us.

Not those who want to be served

Salome came to Jesus with this request for her two sons when Jesus was talking to his disciples about going up to Jerusalem to suffer terribly for the sins of the world. Listen to what he told them. "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life." Jesus describes being "handed over." That is the same word used for being betrayed. Judas handed Jesus over to the people who came to the Garden to arrest him, they handed Jesus over to the high priest. The high priest handed him over to Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate handed him over to Herod, and Herod handed back to Pilate and Pilate handed him over to the soldiers to be crucified. Each time this happened Jesus experienced another level of suffering and pain. Romans 4:25 says, "He was delivered (or handed over) for our offenses and raised again for our justification.

Jesus did not hide the details of his suffering and death. The movie the *Passion of the Christ* has been criticized for being too graphic and too brutal in the portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death. Jesus told his disciples that he would be condemned to death, mocked, whipped and finally crucified. He also told them in the clearest words possible that he would rise from the dead. We think of how graphically the prophet Isaiah described the suffering Jesus would go through for us, "wounded for our transgressions" and "bruised for our iniquities." When Peter heard this he told Jesus to not go and Jesus had to say, "Get behind me Satan."

The request of this mother is so totally out of place considering what Jesus is saying about rescuing us by giving his life for us. How could she ever kneel before Jesus and make the request, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at our right and the other at your left in your kingdom?" These two sons went along with her. Think of a father who is dying. His three sons are gathered around him. They talk to their dad about going home to be with the Lord. Out of the clear blue one of the sons says, "Dad, you know that nice Delta contractor table saw you have in the garage, is it OK if I take that after you die?" It would a totally selfish request similar to the selfish and self centered request by Salome for her two boys to be big shots in the kingdom of God.

How does Jesus handle this situation? When sin rears its ugly head he deals with it, but ever so gently and yet so firmly. First he says, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" They said they could drink the cup but they were clueless as to the sacrifices they would some day make for the name of Jesus. Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from the cup but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant." Jesus had emptied himself of his power as God. He did not even know the hour of his return at during this part of his life. As he was going to the cross, he was not in a position to grant them such a request. But then he says something interesting, "These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by the Father." There will be special places of glory in God's kingdom for those who live their life for Christ and expend themselves for others. The place Jesus has prepared for us is the same for all, and it is given to us freely by God's grace. For those who serve others there will be the glory of seeing how their lives of service benefited others. Daniel 12 says that those who lead others to righteousness will shine like the stars. Real, lasting glory comes with serving not being served.

The other disciples heard this request. It turned their stomachs and made them angry.

"When they heard about this, they were indignant." See how the kids begin to fight when one of them says, "I am first" or "I am better than you are." Look at the anger in the eyes when the words are spoken, "Ha! Ha! I have the bigger piece."

Have you ever seen Christians fighting about being first in the kingdom of God? Read the letter to the Corinthians and see how they boasted about following Paul, or Peter or Apollos. Some people enjoy getting their way and marginalizing other people and making them less important. Why do dear Christians in a congregation get into fights over what color the carpeting should be in the sanctuary, or what hymns are chosen for worship, or whether or not to have celery and carrots in a relish tray or just celery? When people have strong opinions, they think they are doing the best for their Lord if everything goes their way. It is OK to have strong opinions in things neither forbidden or commanded by God, but we always have to ask whether we are expressing ourselves because we think we are better than others or because it is the best way to serve the Lord.

There is an old Filipino proverb that says, "The higher the bamboo grows, the more it bends low to the ground." Look at the stand of bamboo along the Santa Ynez River. See how it reaches up high, but then bends over with the wind and rain. God's plan for people in his kingdom is to raise them up to the highest heights in Christ and then off them humble service to others.

Some years ago, a well known pastor from Southern California wrote a book about serving in the kingdom of God. He drew a lot of his material for the book from these verses from Matthew 20. I recall a story he told about how hard it was for him to not always want to be first, even to the point of forgetting the needs of others around him. He was attending a Christian camp at Hulme Lake with his son. He signed up for a canoe race with other dads and sons. He told how he stood in line and actually changed his position in line because he saw the order the canoes were being assigned, and he knew if he could get the better canoe it would help win the race. All of us have been there at various times in our lives. We have seen the evil in our hearts and it is frightening to behold.

Rather those who want to serve

What does Jesus do to solve the tension and teach a lesson that would never be forgotten? Jesus gathers the disciples around him. Whenever there is conflict in the church and people want their way instead of serving each other in love, it is good to gather around Jesus and listen to what he has to tell us about getting along with each other. It is also good to do this if there is conflict in the family. Jesus points out to his fighting disciples that people in his kingdom function differently than the people of this world. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Now so with you. Whoever want to become great among you us be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."

Maybe you can remember back to the 1990's when a story appeared in the news about the "Pom-Pom Mom" who wanted her daughter to make the cheer leading squad so badly, she plotted a way to kill the mother of one of the girls on the squad. She hoped the girl would be so stressed out over her mother's death that she would quit cheerleading and her daughter would have a chance to make the team. How about that person you know

who rose to the top of his company but stepped on dozens of people on the way up to the top of the ladder? That's the way the people of this world function. That is not the way for people who have been born again into the kingdom of God. When you hear someone talking badly about other people at work, you know it is only a matter of time before they talk badly about you as well.

When Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, there was still this tension and fighting among them over who was the greatest in the kingdom of God. Jesus took a towel, with a basin of water, wrapped the towel around his waist and began wash their feet one by one. Think of the silence that must have been in that room that night. All they heard was the water being poured into a basin and the voice of Jesus saying, "You should do as I have done for you." That night Jesus showed them the full extent of his love by allowing himself to be handed over and condemned to death for us.

We end this sermon realizing how often we have sinned and fallen short of God's glory by thinking too much of ourselves as James and John did along with their mother Salome. We can point our fingers in disgust at the Pom Pom Mom or to some helicopter parent who will push your child aside to get theirs in the front of the line. We are no different. Our only hope is in Jesus who says to us this morning, "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." When we look at the nail prints in the hands of Jesus, and hear him say to us, "Peace be to you" we realize we have forgiveness, and peace and love this world does not have. It is a peace and love so great it can make us eager to stand up and be the first to say, "Let me help you" even with people who hurt us. Amen.