

November 4, 2012
Pentecost 22

"Greatness Comes with Serving"

MARK 10:35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." ³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

There is an old Filipino saying: "The higher the bamboo grows, the lower it bends to the ground. Maybe you have seen the bamboo growing in the river beds of California. The taller it grows, the more it bends to the ground with the weight of the leaves and the force of the wind.

If only this were true in life: The higher the success the more likely people are willing to serve. The opposite is more often true. The higher the success the less likely people want to serve.

James and John really disappoint us this morning as we hear them come to Jesus with a special request. "Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory." Children will fight over who gets to go first or who gets the biggest piece. It is hard to imagine that such an attitude exists among Jesus' beloved disciples, especially as they are going up to Jerusalem where Jesus will suffer and die for our sin.

I wish I could I always say I have thought of others first and myself second. I know that has not been true in my life and I am certain that has not always been true in your life. We need Jesus to remind us that true greatness in his kingdom comes with serving. That includes being willing to suffer for him.

The ugliness of self-centered selfishness

We cannot say enough bad about the self-centered request of James and John that came at such an inopportune time. "Then Jesus and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him, 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'" That seems like a rather bold and audacious request. "Teacher, do for us whatever we ask."

A girl named Jennifer was coming to Sunday school every week. She was also baptized, even though her parents wanted nothing to do with coming to church. Then she stopped coming to Sunday and church because she had been praying for a horse and the Lord did not give her horse. You would not think of praying, "Lord, give me anything I ask." You always have in your prayers the words, "Not my will but yours be done." The key to modern advertising is self-gratification. You can have what you want and you can have it now!

Jesus asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" Do they ask for greater humility, or a greater measure of the Holy Spirit, or more help to serve others? No, James and John selfishly ask for special places of glory in Jesus' kingdom. "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." The gospel of Matthew tells us that their mother was also involved in this request, the same mother who faithfully was there for Jesus when he was dying at the cross. How could such wonderful people be so self-centered and selfish? It almost takes our breath away.

Imagine a situation where a man is facing major life threatening surgery. His three sons and wife are around him and even praying with him as he is ready to go into surgery. The youngest son says, "Dad, do you think if you die in surgery, I might have the new DeWalt contractor's table saw you just bought?" Can't you see the anger in the eyes of the other brothers? How could he be so selfish and so out of touch with what dad is going through? Can't you see the anger in the eyes of the other disciples as they hear James and John make this special request? Jesus has just been talking to them about being handed over to the Gentiles, spit on, flogged and killed and then rising to life again on the third day.

Satan certainly knows how to raise up feelings of selfishness and self promotion in us when we least expect it. He did it with Adam and Eve didn't he? "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil." I wish I could say I always thought of others first and myself second. I wish I could say I was always more worried about what I thought about other people and how I could serve them rather than how they might give me attention and serve me.

Jesus cannot allow such a self centered request as this to go unchecked. He loves his disciples. He loved James and John. He loved their mother. He tells them, "You don't know that you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or the be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" Jesus was about to drink a cup of suffering that included taking the sin of the world upon himself and being punished for that sin. Our reading from Isaiah says "It was God's will to crush him" Jesus was about to be crushed and baptized with unbelievable pain and suffering for our sin. He would suffer the torments of hell itself as he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" The disciples would someday have to drink their own cup and be baptized with their own suffering as they brought the suffering and death and resurrection to people lost in sin and unbelief.

James and John tell Jesus they are ready to drink the cup and be baptized with suffering for him. They tell Jesus, "We can." You see dear Christian, the higher you go up in the kingdom of God the more suffering there will be for you. As you grow in your faith and appreciate more each day what Jesus has done for you, you are compelled to share this with other people. That's when the trouble starts. Here is how Paul describes it in 2

Corinthians 4, "We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus sake, so that his life might be revealed in our mortal bodies."

Jesus tells James and John that they will have to suffer for him. "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with but to sit my right hand or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." As Jesus was prepared to go to the cross he was in no position to set up places of honor for people who are part of his kingdom. Now it is different. Jesus is at the right hand of God and he is raising up people to serve in different positions in his kingdom. The higher you go in the kingdom of God in service to Jesus, the greater will be the crosses and troubles that come into your life. The closer you follow Jesus, the heavier your cross will be as you lay down your life to bring honor and glory to his name.

The other disciples were indignant with James and John. "When the ten heard it they became indignant with James and John." Selfish people have a way of making you angry, sometime even very angry. Picture yourself on the East Coast after hurricane Sandy, waiting in line for hours to get fuel for your car. Just as you are ready to drive up to the pump, someone drives their car in off the street and cuts ahead of you. At that point your anger level reaches ten on the anger meter. Remember the Monopoly game when you landed on Boardwalk where your brother had hotels and you had to shell out hundreds of dollars in rent. He gloated over beating you and felt like throwing down your cards and walking away from the game. Selfishness in others has a way of causing anger and selfishness to grow in us. Has someone ever selfishly hurt your feelings in your Christian family or even in your church? You had to pray continuously to have the strength not to hurt the person who hurt you?

Jesus sees the flashes of anger in the eyes of his disciples. He calls them together for a huddle to give them an important lesson in not thinking so much about themselves. He wants to teach them to serve just as he has served us.

The beauty of Christ-like service

First Jesus points to the way people in the world fail in their service to others. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." You can travel to Europe and see old castles that remind us of a time when little kings lived in the lap of luxury while their poor people in the country side did not have enough food to eat and fuel to make it through the winter. Remember the bumper sticker that reads, "The man with the most toys wins." Modern advertising says indulge yourself, you are worth it. "You deserve a break today." Witness the change in magazine titles from "Life" to "People" to "Us" and finally "Me."

It is different in the kingdom of God. Jesus tells us, "Not so you with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all." Think back to the night when Jesus celebrated the Lord's Supper with his disciples for the first time. He began the meal by washing the disciples' feet. One by one the watched as Jesus poured water on their feet and then wiped them with a towel he had wrapped around his waist. He told them to love each other as he had loved them.

Real greatness comes with serving others first, not looking to be served by others.

Real greatness also comes with being served by Jesus. "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus speaks about himself as the Son of Man. Every time he says "Son of Man" he wants us to think of how as our Lord and God he became fully human to serve us. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of kings, the Creator of the Universe, a perfect and Holy God. Everything inside of us tells us that we must do something to serve this King in order to gain his favor. Our King comes to us. We feel like falling down before him in shame. We cry out, "Lord have mercy on us! Christ have mercy on us!" We have nothing to offer him to save ourselves from our sin. We have nothing to pay for the times we have been so selfish and self-centered. Our King comes to us. He bows down to us. He kneels before us. He takes all our sin upon himself. He gives his life for us at the cross to provide the sacrifice or ransom price need to forgive us. No religion in the world, no religion in all the world, nothing in the realm of human existence has anything offer to people similar to what Jesus offers. He serves us with his life at the cross so we can be forgiven. He serves us so we can serve him in joy and happiness and also serve each other. That's true greatness. Amen.