

Pentecost 22
October 25, 2015

“Me First?”

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.”

It’s a me-first world. It starts with the little children. They fight to be first in line with the words, “me-first.” They grab for the first cookie with the words “me-first.” Some never grow out of thinking “me-first.” The young man buys a new truck and places a bumper sticker on the back that says, “The one with the most toys wins.”

You see it everywhere. This me-first syndrome. We see it in the aggressive drivers who cut you off because they want to be first. You see it in the girl at work who will do anything to promote herself even though everyone knows she is grossly incompetent. We see it in James and John who had the audacity to ask Jesus if they could have positions of honor in his kingdom because they thought they should be first. If you are willing to take an honest, you will see this me-first syndrome in yourself

How selfish we are!

“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’” Notice it says that they came to Jesus. They came up to Jesus with something they wanted for themselves that showed how selfish they were. The gospel account in Matthew also tells us that their mother was involved in making this request to Jesus. They did not come to Jesus for help in dealing with the selfish thoughts they were having in their hearts. They came to Jesus with this outrageous request that Jesus would grant them whatever they asked. They were only thinking of themselves. Imagine going to Jesus in prayer and saying, “Give me what whatever I ask.” That would be the height of arrogance and pride.

What amazes us about Jesus is the way he handled their request. He uses this opportunity to help them see how selfish they truly were. Jesus said, **“What do you want me to**

do for you?" Jesus is holding a big mirror in front of them to help them see their sin of coveting.

What is coveting? It is a sinful desire that rises up in the heart and thinks only of self and not about God or others. One girl in my youth confirmation class gave a good definition of coveting when she said, "Coveting is wanting something so badly you are willing to forget about God to get it." The disciples were certainly not thinking of Jesus and what he said about going to the cross for our sin when they came with this selfish request.

Listen now as they reveal how rotten and corrupt their hearts have become by sinful desire or coveting: **"They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.'"** You don't hear them offering to help Jesus as he prepares to suffer and die for our sin Jerusalem. You don't hear them tell Jesus that they would be praying for him. All they can think about is some kingdom of glory here on this earth where they will have positions of high honor.

Picture in your mind two sons standing next to their father's bed as he prepares to go into major surgery that could take his life. One of the son's says, "Dad, if you die, can I have the new table saw you just bought?" I can't imagine any son ever doing this? I can't imagine James and John making such a selfish request of Jesus. Yet, it happened. It has been recorded for us on the pages of the Bible. 1 Corinthians 10 tells us why the Bible shows us people are self-centered and selfish, "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did."

Jesus is so patient and loving with these disciples and their selfish request just as he is patient and loving with us when we are way too self-centered and self-absorbed. **"'You don't want what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?'"** The word baptism is usually used for washing and pouring water. Here Jesus uses this word to describe the suffering that will be poured out on him. We heard about this baptism of suffering and the cup of suffering in our first lesson. The prophet Isaiah said, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." It was God's plan to punish Jesus in our place for our sin. And if you believe that this is true and you confess it clearly you will also suffer for Christ and his cross. Do you want a place of honor in God's kingdom? Then don't look for positions of glory as James and John did. Look for the opportunity to bear a cross for Jesus. As the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might also be revealed in our body."

It shocks us that James and John tell Jesus they are ready to drink a cup of suffering for him. Perhaps they were thinking that if they suffered some for Jesus eventually they would have these places of honor at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus. Jesus has to repeat what he said a second time. **"You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right hand or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."** As Jesus suffers and dies for our sin he is in no position to grant places of honor in his kingdom. This will happen when Jesus returns in glory on the last day. The greatest honor that could be given to us is to suffer for Jesus as we bring the gospel to people. That would eventually happen to both James and John.

The other disciples are indignant at James and John for their selfish request. **“When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.”** Have you ever been indignant or angry because some said “me-first” and then took what you wanted? Sure you have, more than once, not just during childhood days but even in the adult years. Remember when you were upset with the coach for not giving your son or daughter more playing time? Remember when someone cut in front of you will you were standing in line? Remember when you were passed over for a job by someone who was less capable than you were but had the gift of gab to talk their way into a job? The disciples were indignant. They were angry. That is not the first time we see this anger. Another time they were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest in the kingdom of God. Jesus had to set a child in their midst and say, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

Have you ever seen Christians get upset with other Christians even in their own congregation? I have. Paul had to deal with that in Corinth. Some of the people bragged about following Peter, and others Apollos and others Paul. There was no end of tension as the prima donna Christians in Corinth wanted others to take notice of them instead of bending down to serve others. In Philippians chapter two Paul writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others more important than yourself.” There is an old Filipino saying, “The higher the bamboo grow, the lower it bends.” Look at the bamboo that grows along the rivers of California. The tips of the highest bamboo shoots will bend over and eventually touch the ground. Some of the greatest people in the kingdom of God are those who are more concerned about serving than being served.

It was hard for me to write this sermon this past week. It was hard because in looking at James and John, I had to take some time to reflect on my own life. There have been times when I have worked hard to serve my wife as a faithful husband, but there have been times when my things became more important than hers. There have been times when I was selfish as child, times I don’t even want to think about. There have been times when I have not always thought of others first as I should whether it be people in this community or people in this congregation. What I have seen in my life you have also seen in your life. That is why it is such a privilege to tell you about how Jesus put us first in his willingness to give himself for us.

How unselfish Jesus is!

The only way to get rid of these me-first sins in our lives that pop up everywhere is to look at how Jesus made us first by giving his life for us. Jesus says, **“For the Son of Man did not come to be served but serve and to give his life as ransom for many.”** Here is Jesus, King of all kings, and Lord of all lords. He speaks to us in the Psalms and says, “The cattle on a thousand hills are mine.” This mighty King becomes someone who kneels down to serve us so we can become first in his eyes and first in his kingdom. He is not like the rulers of the Gentiles who enjoy lording it over others. He is not like the kings who build castles and live in luxury while their people starve to death in winter. In true greatness he became our servant. He came to us and said, “I am going to make you first. I am going to take your sin upon myself including your sin of selfishness and be crushed at the cross so you can be forgiven. All other religions of the world enslave you by making you do something to redeem yourself. Only in the Christian faith do you have God giving his Son to serve you by giving his life for you.

Jesus redeemed me when I was a lost and condemned creature. He redeemed me so I could be his own and serve in his kingdom. He took someone who was born into this world saying, "Me first" and made me first in his kingdom. He is my Shepherd. I rest as a lamb in his loving arms in this life and for all eternity. I wake up each day knowing I am intensely loved not because I have achieved anything. Everything was done for me. Me first? Yes, Jesus made me first. Jesus made you first. That so humbles us that we are willing to do anything to serve him and those around us. Amen.