

## IF YOU WOULD BE GREAT . . .

(04/26/2020)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 10:35-45

*“It is not so among you, 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 a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:44-45)

Today is the second Sunday after Easter (the third Sunday in the Easter season). It is also the seventh Sunday that our church, in compliance with Governor Baker’s restrictions on public gatherings, has been unable to meet as the gathered church for Sunday morning worship (and, of course, coffee hour).

Let me say that I am both angry at and ashamed of those pastors, including one in our area, who insist on holding worship services “as a Constitutional right,” who are delusional enough to believe they are actually taking a stand against Satan and against the government’s campaign against religion. To give them the benefit of the doubt, they may actually view themselves in the tradition of the early Christian martyrs. If there was ever a case of what Jung would call “identification with an archetype,” with its resultant inflation and lack of rational reflection, this is it! How can a church be doing something right when it puts its own parishioners and also the rest of us in harm’s way, in serious harm’s way?

Don’t get me going on the matter of how people in positions of authority have responded or not responded to the pandemic that has spread throughout the world! I find scant comfort in the fact that delusional, closed-minded, anti-science, self-serving thinking has not been confined to certain state and federal officials in our country. There are places in the world that are even worse! Scant comfort, indeed.

Getting back to the matter of worship, of returning to scripture and reflecting on its message to us, a few weeks ago one of our parishioners included a note along with the pledge that he mailed to the church. The note asked if I would please explain what Jesus meant when he said that the first shall be last and the last first, when he said that the way to become great in the kingdom of God is to become a servant. This morning, I would like to address his question, for I feel it helps us to understand the true meaning of the resurrection.

Today’s scripture lesson elucidates a fundamental distinction between the Christian way of life and the general pattern of life in our culture. In his depiction of what it means to be a disciple of the Way, Jesus presents a counter-cultural directive. What he teaches is not only

dissonant with the values of our culture, it is also dissonant with our own values, for our values and priorities are shaped by the collective, by our culture more than we consciously realize.

The primary values of our capitalistic society are materialistic values. Our society honors and rewards success. Its primary motivation arises from what Sigmund Freud referred to as the pleasure principle, the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain. We are taught to “look out for number One (meaning us).” To be successful in business or industry, we need to be competitive. If we are “hungry,” as corporations describe their most highly prized employees, we will step over people or elbow our way to the top.

Jesus not only shows us another set of values by the way he lived his life, he calls us to live by these values. He extols the value of being a slave rather than a master, a servant rather than a lord. He preached his message to the nation of Israel two thousand years ago, and he brings this message to our time, to our culture as well.

Jesus directs his message not only to his culture, but also and perhaps especially to the religious institutions of his day. He challenges them to think about what it means to be successful. He brings the same message to the church of our time and to our little church. He calls us to become a servant church. He tells us we are not meant to be wealthy or successful in the eyes of the world (and we certainly have a head start on this!). He tells us we are called to serve our parishioners, our community, and the world.

Prior to his conversation with James and John, Jesus has openly predicted his suffering and death. Following Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus

*began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)*

Upon hearing this, Peter has the unmitigated gall to rebuke Jesus. That strikes me as a little cheeky! Jesus counters by telling Peter “you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

After this exchange, as recorded in chapter 9 of Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples,

*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. (Mark 9:31)*

Mark says, “But they [the disciples] did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Immediately preceding the scripture lesson that we read, Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like little children. He tells the rich young man to sell all he owns, give it to the poor, and become a disciple. He declares that “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The disciples fail to grasp what Jesus is saying. The Way that Jesus teaches is countercultural. It has nothing to do with the pleasure principle. It exalts the weak rather than the strong, the child rather than the adult, the servant rather than the lord. It is the way of suffering and the cross.

The disciples either do not understand what Jesus is saying or they are in denial; they do not want to accept it. When they do grasp his message, they probably believe that his description of the Way applies exclusively to him and not to them. They fail to understand that what Jesus tells them about his destiny also applies to them and their destiny.

I have heard Christians say that one of the things they like about Christianity is that we don't have to do anything; it has already been done for us. Jesus suffered *for us*. Jesus died *for us*. He suffered and died so we wouldn't have to suffer and die. I'm sorry, my friends, but I think this is a mistaken reading of the gospel. We have to walk the path that Jesus walked. Jesus shows us the way of life not only for himself, but also for us. He calls us to radical discipleship, the way of suffering and death.

James and John, who have just listened to Jesus' teachings, apparently don't get it. They assume that when they enter heaven or when the kingdom of God is spread upon the earth, things will be as they are now. There will be places of honor at the table. The only difference is that Jesus will occupy the seat of honor instead of the emperor. The centurions will be removed from the places of honor, as will the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. In their place (*ta da!!*) will be the disciples! James and John are simply making a reservation, just as we would do at a fancy restaurant, to assure their places at table. With a notable lack of humility, they ask if they can be seated one at the right hand of Jesus and the other at his left.

Mark was the first of the gospels to be written. Matthew, who compiled his gospel later, apparently felt the need to doctor Mark's account. He has James and John's mother make the request (Mt 20:20-28). By doctoring the original text and framing it this way, James and John don't look dull, stupid, and greedy; their pushy mother was the problem. Luke takes this a step further--he totally omits the story, including the section where James and John blithely assert that

they are able to drink the cup that Jesus drinks and be baptized with his baptism. (Of course, they have absolutely no idea what they have just said and what this would involve!)

In response to James and John's request to be given positions of honor, Jesus points them toward the cross. If the kingdom of God becomes a living reality on earth and also in us, it will not be accomplished by power and it will not be attended by honor. It will become a living reality in us when we follow the path that Jesus walks, the path of selfless love. It will come to us in those moments when we serve, not when we are being served. It will come to us through the burdens that we carry, the afflictions that beset us, and ultimately through the death of all we hold dear. Then we will experience the eternal life that Jesus promises to those who follow him.

Who, in human history, would you name as the most authentic Christians? I think of Francis of Assisi. Francis gave up the riches his father wanted to pass on to him to embark upon a life of radical poverty. He called people from the pursuit of pleasure to the pursuit of eternal life. In founding his order, Francis sought to reform the wealthy church of his day, to rebuild Christ's church according to the dictates of the gospel.

When I was young, I was fascinated by Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a theologian and an accomplished physician. He was one of the top two or three organists and interpreters of Bach's organ music in the world. He gave up his comfortable life as a physician and master organist to build a hospital in Africa. His life had a profound effect upon me. I'm sure it had something to do with my later call to the Christian ministry. It probably planted the seed.

I think of Mother Teresa. I believe that this humble woman, who spent her life ministering to the homeless and dying of Calcutta, knew what it meant to be a Christian. I don't think Mother Teresa had a lot of money or even a lot of fancy clothes.

Once a year, we extend an invitation to become a member of our church. It is tempting to persuade you to join us by promising you something. This is the approach that evangelists have often used. In the 1920's, Daddy Grace preached that if you became a member of his church and supported his church (actually him) financially, riches beyond your wildest dreams would miraculously come to you. I wonder what happened to his followers when the money that was promised didn't materialize. (The word "disillusioned" comes to mind.) I always thought that Daddy Grace must have had quite a challenge to find gospel passages that present this understanding of church membership as a basic teaching of Jesus.

We do not go this route. It is clear from today's scripture lesson that Jesus is not a means to our ends, the way to get what we want--at least if what we want is consonant with the secular

materialism of our culture. The promise that regular church attendance will help lower our blood pressure (which it apparently does), that it may extend our life by several years (which it apparently does), and that it may cut several strokes off our golf score (which has never been proven), is the approach of spiritual materialism. This is not what Jesus taught. This is not the message of the gospel.

If you are considering becoming a member of this church, all we can promise you is increased opportunities to serve. We invite you to share our burdens and our problems. We invite you to share our life and to grow with us. We will probably never be a rich and successful church, but I'm not sure that's what Jesus wants. Jesus wants us to challenge the secular values of our culture and also our own values. He calls us to the task and joy of discipleship.

In the realm or the kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down. There will not be a table of honor with its seats occupied by different people. It has nothing to do with honor. To lead is to serve. The place of honor is not at the head of the table but in the kitchen. The greatest reward is not a gold watch but a basin and a towel. We must remember that the people who were at the right and left hand of Jesus when he entered into glory were hanging on a cross.

James and John do not realize that life is not about them; it is about God. God may have created life and guided its evolution until human beings finally appeared. God may have realized that without life, the universe, though filled with the Spirit of God, is essentially empty. Without humans, it is not possible for God to be in relationship. I believe God actually experiences the world through us. We are God's eyes and ears, God's hands and heart. In this sense, God needs us as much as we need God.

James and John make the mistake of thinking life is about them. They are ego-centric rather than God-centric. When we realize life is not about us, but about God, we die to this ego-centric attitude. Then power and glory fade into insignificance. New life emerges as God lives both in us and through us. What is important is the way that we incarnate God, the way that we serve as co-creators with God of this wonderful world that we call our daily life.

In our daily lives, with the burdens we carry, with the physical and medical afflictions that beset us, we still have an opportunity to be creative. Our acts of serving, of caring, of giving are an expression of Christ's self-giving love. When we are truly disciples, when we serve our Lord rather than ourselves, God through Christ creates the world of our daily lives and leads it forth into new life.

If we were actually meeting in worship, I would have asked our choir to sing one of my favorite anthems. I simply don't have the expertise to record this anthem and include it along with this sermon in an audio form. So, let us consider the words of the anthem "Take My Voice" for the message it brings to us as Christians and as members of this church:

*Take now my voice, Let me sing for Thee.  
Fill me with your music, Lord, Sing Your song through me.  
Take now my hands, Let me touch for Thee.  
Fill me with Your kindness, Lord. Heal the world through me.  
Fill me with Your living Word, let it set my way.  
Make in me Your temple, Lord. Shine through me each day.  
Take now my heart. Let me love for Thee.  
Fill me with Your spirit, Lord. Love the world through me.  
Take my life, Lord. Let me live for Thee.  
O fill me Lord. Change the world through me.  
Fill me with Your power, Lord. Change the world through me.*

If only the disciples could have grasped this. But they do! They do not grasp it immediately, but only after the death of their teacher. When they experience the risen Christ both within and among them, they come alive! They grasp the essence of Jesus' teaching that the first will be last and the last first, that in order to save our life we have to give it away. They find their life not in being served but in serving their Lord. Their entire world view is turned upside down!

I guess this means there is also hope for us. God grant that we, like the disciples, will grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' counter-cultural message and that it will transform us as individuals and as a church. This is the path, the Way to which we are called as post-resurrection Christians!

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