

March 29, 2009  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Servanthood? Me?”

Mark 10:32-45

*And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”*

*And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Sermon

Look before you leap. Don't count your chickens before their hatched. Be careful of what you wish for, you just might get it. All of these familiar sayings have to do with knowing what you are getting yourself into, before you actually get yourself into it. It's a good practice. Just ask anyone who decided to jump into the real estate market three years ago.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, really didn't know what they were asking when they approached Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and said, “*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*” They were thinking ahead to when Jesus would claim kingship of Israel, probably thinking of positions of power near to the king. “*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*”

Jesus gives them the somewhat cryptic response; “*You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*” James and John in their ignorance are eager to answer in the affirmative. “*We are able.*” I don't think they have a clue what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is speaking of what is ahead in Jerusalem; His impending torture, crucifixion and death. I don't think James and John are after a piece of that pie, but Jesus knows that one day they will indeed suffer and likely die for Christ's name. “*The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized,*” he says. But Jesus also knows the places they've asked for are reserved. “*But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.*”

James and John wanted greatness, power, glory and honor. They wanted it so badly that they were willing to try to kind of sneak it in under the radar by asking Jesus about it privately. When the other disciples found out they were quite upset, probably because they didn't think to do it first or they thought James and John were trying to swindle them out of their places of greatness, power, glory and honor.

Jesus calls them all together and lays out a picture that I'm sure the disciples weren't expecting. He talks about the rulers of the Gentiles, probably the Romans who were occupying Israel at the time, and He points out how they walk around flaunting their greatness, power, glory and honor—the very things the disciples are desiring—and then He says, *“But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be a slave of all.”* And then He tells them the reason why it is so. It is because the one they follow is this way, and this way to the extreme. *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

One of the frustrating things about this passage is that we aren't told what happens next. We don't know how James and John and the other ten reacted to Jesus' words. But it's a pretty fair guess that they misunderstood. In all the Gospels, but especially in Mark, the disciples have a knack for not understanding what Jesus is saying, especially when He speaks to them about giving up His life in Jerusalem. But at the very least it probably gave them pause. Maybe this being aligned with Christ wasn't going to be all they anticipated it to be.

It gives us pause also.

We're all good and fine when Jesus Christ crucified for our sins is proclaimed. We are totally on board when Jesus' resurrection from the dead so that we also may rise to everlasting life is proclaimed. I think we even pretty well get it when the need for repentance of our sins unto forgiveness is proclaimed. But servanthood? Not just servanthood, but servanthood to everybody? Slave of all? That really makes us squirm in our shoes. On some level that makes us pause in our Christianity to look before we leap, to count our eggs, to be careful what we're wishing for.

You see, we are not all that different from the disciples. Even we Christians are deeply enmeshed in a culture in which people seek greatness, power, honor and glory. When we dream, we dream of being the kind of people that have servants, not the people that are servants. Jesus calls us to seek what is contrary to those wishes. He turns what we find desirable upside down and tells us to seek the exact opposite.

These places at Jesus right and left that James and John wanted? Those places were taken and the brothers probably weren't too happy about it. But James and John were probably lucky in that what Jesus was talking about as His glory wasn't what they had in mind. Who got to be at Jesus right and left in His glory? Two unnamed thieves. Jesus' glory wasn't in a display of earthly power and might but in His serving humanity unto the point of death on a cross in between two criminals. And He goes so far as to say that it is this kind of loving servanthood which makes a person truly great.

He has called us to this type of servanthood. The nerve of that guy! Of course it gives us pause. We have got to stop and think, “Do I really want to be on board with forsaking my own greatness and power and glory and honor?” Our sinful nature likes these things, likes raising our own self up to be a god unto ourselves. The idea of being a slave to all? It really doesn't jive with that impulse to be like a god that drove Adam and Eve to eat of that tree in Eden.

(pause)

But wait a minute. Let's count our eggs here. Let's look before that leap. Just what is it that such a question is wishing for? Jesus Christ has called us through faith to be this servant. He died on the cross and rose again to redeem us from death and the devil and all this foolish sinful thinking. We were baptized into Christ and He, the servant of all servants, now dwells in us. The question is not do we want to do this. We are already there. We are the new person that God's Holy Spirit has made us in Christ Jesus.

Choosing to opt for our own greatness and power and honor and glory is to opt out of Christ. It is grabbing for a piece of a decaying and dying world that doesn't last. We stand now as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven; the eternal and everlasting reign of Christ. We were baptized into Christ's greatness, Christ's power, Christ's honor, Christ's glory. The question is not if we want to jump on board with Christ's servanthood. The question is why in the world we would ever think of not being on board with His servanthood? The question is how can I be a better slave to all to the glory of He who saved me?

Paul writes to the baptized in Philippi, *"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..."* and he goes on to describe Christ's great servanthood and the cross and how it was because of His sacrifice that *"God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Any short greatness or power or honor or glory a person might attain in this earthly life comes to nothing in the face of the everlasting glory of Christ. But Christ dwells in us and when we are serve others in selfless love out of faith in Christ, we are partaking in His glory. Have this mind of Christ. Look to serve others in ways that will lead them to the everlasting life we enjoy. Lift each other up in the faith unto this everlasting life. This servanthood leads to greatness, Christ's greatness, and it is a gift of God because He has put you in Christ, where true power and glory and honor abide from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.