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Mark 10:32-45

THE ROAD TO GLORY

Do you remember what it was you did as a kid to claim something you wanted before your brothers or sisters? If you were like a lot of kids, you had a system of “calling” something. You might shout out “I call the last piece of cake,” and according to the code honored by all kids, the last piece was rightfully yours. Or if you were getting ready to watch TV you would shout, “I call the couch,” and that favorite seat was automatically yours. And for sure, before heading out in the car, you would have to declare, “I call shotgun,” to claim the privilege of sitting in the front seat while your siblings were relegated to the back. It’s amazing how this system of kids calling something they want is passed down through the generations of children. How do they learn this? I have never, ever heard of parents sitting their children down and instructing them, “Now if you want something before your brothers, you have to “call” it.” And yet, mysteriously, this system endures and is honored, albeit with grumbling, by children of each generation.

This is what James and John were doing in our reading today. They were “calling” the best seats before any of the other disciples could claim them first. These two brothers approach Jesus and ask him to let them have the seats on either side of him when he rose to glory. But before we judge them too harshly, let’s recall that as men who knew poverty, these brothers had rarely enjoyed special privileges—the kinds of privileges that come from membership in some exclusive club: the fine dining and a round of golf at the country club, the chance to part that curtain and take a seat in first class, the special treatment extended to those who flash their

special gold embossed credit card. These boys just wanted what most of us want—some of the benefits and perks that come with membership.

Their maneuvering for positions of glory really upset the other disciples. I have my doubts that the other ten disciples were angered because they perceived the brothers had violated some moral or ethical principles. Rather, it is likely that the other disciples were offended because the two brothers had called shotgun before the rest of them had even thought to do it themselves. The other ten were upset because they believed they had lost out on some privilege, some benefit—as if there was only so much glory and honor to go around and they each had better claim theirs before it was all taken.

None of the disciples, however, seem to recognize the irony in their scramble for power and glory. Moments before James and John's power grab, Jesus shared with all twelve disciples the chain of events that was about to unfold—about his arrest, his trial, the abuse and suffering he will experience, and his death by crucifixion. This was clearly a very “un-glorious” set of events that awaited the Messiah. And it is the third time that Jesus told the disciples about his upcoming Passion experience of suffering and death. It is the third time that Jesus has tried to teach them that the road to glory runs straight through the cross—that sacrifice and service are the essence of what it means to be the Christ and that sacrifice and service are what it will mean to be his disciple.

Yet, the disciples don't grasp his message. And perhaps that is because the disciples are confused about the difference between membership and discipleship. Membership is an association with a special group of people whereby the individual member receives some kind of benefit from the association. Country club members may pay high dues, but they also enjoy the benefits of the restaurant, the golf course, the tennis and racquetball courts. Become a member

of the zoo, and you get to enter as many times a year as you want and also benefit from discounts at the gift shop. Typically, membership offers an array of benefits.

Discipleship, however, is something entirely different. Jesus has been trying to teach about discipleship and in today's reading he tries once again. And he tells his followers that discipleship means service. "Whoever wishes to become great among you," Jesus says, "must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." He finishes by explaining the reason for his coming, the purpose of the Messiah: "For the Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Service is the essence of discipleship. Service is what it means to be a follower of Christ. And this is a radically different concept than membership. While membership is associated with receiving some kind of personal benefit or perk, discipleship is the opposite. Discipleship is all about doing for others.

The concept of serving others sounds pretty ok from a distance. But up close, when confronted with service, it isn't always our preference. Service requires sacrifice. Service requires working with unpleasant people. Service requires commitment and putting in long hours. Service requires doing menial, mundane tasks without recognition or gratitude. If Jesus is any example of what the life of service entails, then we might rightly run for the exits. While we can hope that discipleship will have its occasions of joy, of feeling the satisfaction of doing God's work and helping others, personal happiness is not the goal of discipleship.

Jesus teaches us that discipleship requires dying to the self. That's what Jesus meant when he said we are to experience the baptism with which he is baptized. Discipleship runs straight to the cross, where we die to the personal agendas and aspirations of privilege and strivings for personal gain and status, and we are reborn, we are baptized into a new life where

we live to do God's work and to serve God by serving others. And therein lies the glory we seek.

Since that day when James and John first came asking for a bit of glory, the Christian Church has often been confused between these two notions of membership and discipleship. We claim we want to follow the path of discipleship, but over time, the concept of membership tends to creep into our thinking, pushing aside our true calling. And so instead of church being a place that nurtures disciples of Christ, it becomes a place where people come to expect the benefits and privileges of membership. If you're a member, you can get married in the church at no charge. Pledge or contribute financially to the church, and some members expect that they should have a bigger say in the decisions of the congregation. Gradually, some churches become places which exist almost exclusively to meet their members' needs. As societal shifts have meant a decline in church attendance, some churches in a desperate effort to attract and retain members have turned worship into a form of entertainment. Worshippers become "consumers" and the goal is to give them what they want.

Jesus calls the church to create not members but to nurture disciples—people who serve. That is what it means to follow Jesus—to be a person who serves others, a person who walks that sometimes messy, challenging, mundane, frustrating, and tiring way of discipleship. And doing that, walking that road of discipleship, that way of service, will take us on that path of glory.

Jesus wasn't against glory. But Jesus redefines the way to achieve glory. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Everybody can be great . . . because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

Glory is found in daily acts of service—in buying supplies for refugees, in volunteering at a food pantry, in writing letters about an injustice, in forgiving the person who hurt you and trying to reconcile with the one with whom you are estranged. What James and John didn't understand is that there is no shortage of glory to go around. We can have glory in abundance. Indeed, that's the very thing Jesus wants for you and for me.