

We just finished watching the Netflix series, “The Crown”, which I would recommend strongly, even if you’re not particularly an Anglophile or a fan of British royalty. It’s so compelling as it narrates primarily the story of Queen Elizabeth the II, lifting up themes of power, governance, family, dysfunction, and duty. That last theme, duty, was a bit of an eye opener for me; I tended to associate royalty more with privilege than with duty, but I realize now that being born into a royal family is a very mixed experience. Yes, one is entitled to many unique privileges, but one is also mandated into a life of public service that is demanding and unforgiving. Recognizing how much the royals sacrifice their private lives and wants in order to fulfill the service required of them was enlightening for me. Given that reality, I was very much struck by something the Queen said in one of her Jubilee celebration speeches after 50 years of reigning; she stated, “I early on in my reign decided to embrace the philosophy that a life of service is not a sacrifice but an honor.” ..... “a life of service is not a sacrifice, but an honor”. While few of us could claim to have quite the responsibilities or public-service heavy life of a royal like Queen Elizabeth the 2<sup>nd</sup>, we nevertheless know a thing or two about service, don’t we? Particularly for how busy our church and community have been the last few months, many of us have spent a great deal of time in service of one kind or another, whether it’s working with the church patio, singing in the choir, teaching children, serving food at a funeral, putting in time at council meetings, setting up the altar, helping at the food shelf, attending rec center meetings or what-have-you. In such times, it’s sometimes quite easy to feel a little bit sorry for ourselves, to adopt a bit of a martyr-like attitude, and to feel put-upon. The Queen’s words and our Gospel lesson this morning would point us in another direction; a life of service is not a *sacrifice*, but an *honor*. And as Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” Steep though the hill of offering service of one kind or another may feel at times, it is an *honor* to do so, in the name of Christ, and following in His footsteps. We might imagine Christ saying to us even now, “Well done, thou good and faithful servants”, and we *can* be thankful to know that we are following Jesus as we serve others. It’s *so simple*. And yet somehow it’s *so complicated*. In a culture that prizes success, values competition, and loves to assign rank of one kind or another, Jesus’ words tend to make little sense.

Others would argue that additionally, we live in a culture of entitlement, where we believe we are owed rank and privilege simply for being, another attitude that is antithetical to the example of Jesus. But it's not just 21<sup>st</sup> C. Americans in our often-comfortable lives who find these words challenging; so did the first to hear them, the disciples of the 1<sup>st</sup> C., as our lesson reveals. In the shame-honor system of many ancient cultures, including 1<sup>st</sup> C. Palestine, rank and social positioning were all important. This extended to social situations, as in where one sits at a table at an important social event. The places of honor, of course, were next to the host. This meant a great deal to those so honored, and that sitting-in-the-place-of-honor at the table is the metaphor that enters into our lesson this morning.

When I read this lesson, I feel a sense of embarrassment for James and John, marveling at how clueless they are. Just prior to these verses, Jesus has told his disciples for the third time, that as Messiah, he will suffer and be crucified. Each of the three times, the disciples go into a kind of denial mode and respond poorly. The first time, Peter took Jesus aside and actually told Him that He must be mistaken. The second time, the disciples immediately began to argue amongst themselves about who was the greatest. And now this time, James and John respond by asking to have the places of honor at the table beside Jesus in His glory. Why are they so off-base? Possibly because all of them expect Jesus as Messiah to lead Palestine in a successful revolt against their Roman occupiers. They can't accept talk of suffering and servanthood, because their agenda is already fixed: political independence won for Palestine, followed by a glorious victory celebration. Their inability to adjust their agenda to God's plans causes them to reject what Jesus says and instead position themselves well for all the power and glory they expect to come. So when we read this lesson, we *are* embarrassed for James and John, yet I think we can also feel a sense of kinship with them—we want our fair share of recognition, prestige, and power, too. Their request of Jesus is rather childish, and accordingly, they approach it like a child. I can remember my kids saying, “Mom, promise me you'll say Yes to what I'm about to ask you.” You'll be glad to hear that I was always *way* too shrewd to fall for that. Likewise, James and John say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to say Yes to what we're about to ask you.” Jesus is *also* too shrewd to fall for that and says, “First of all, what is it you want?” Well, they want to make an end run around the rest of the

disciples to make sure they get the best seats at the table for the victory feast. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,” they plead. And here’s a great irony. Within about a week of this conversation, Jesus will be hanging on a cross, with a crown of thorns rather than the crown of gold they anticipate. And there will be someone at his left and at his right, but who? The two thieves who are likewise being executed through crucifixion at the same time as Jesus. Who could be less high ranking, less deserving of recognition, less prestigious than those who actually are at the left and right of Christ than those two thieves? Talk about ironic! Asking to be at the right and left hand of Jesus, is that really such a good idea? James and John just don’t get it. And Jesus knows they don’t get it. I have a feeling he looked at them long and steadily before he said, “You don’t know what you’re asking. Can you drink the cup I drink? Can you endure the baptism I endure?” He knows the cup of sorrow and pain he must drink and the baptism into new life he will experience through his death and resurrection. He recognizes that James and John don’t have a clue. Which they prove by assuring him, “Yes, we’re able, we can do whatever needs to be done, we are on team Jesus all the way.” I can imagine Jesus gently and seriously responding, “You *will* drink from my cup and you will be baptized as I am.” Because he can foresee the suffering and death that they will both experience in their genuine discipleship, which primarily occurs after Jesus’ ascension. James, in fact, is the first disciple to be executed, probably in about 44 AD by Herod Agrippa. John’s fate is uncertain, but it is likely he was martyred as well. Through the process of Jesus’ death and resurrection, James and John *grow up* in their understanding of discipleship. They *become* humble servants, willingly serving for the sake of others, even to their deaths. Jesus knows that will be their fate; but they can’t know that at the time of their question. In today’s text, they’re still looking for what’s in this for them. And I guess we can hardly blame them; don’t power and prosperity sound more inviting than humble service to us, as well? But, as always, God’s agenda differs from ours, and God looks for his followers to have the hearts of servants rather than the hearts of worldly success. Jesus looks for disciples willing to *serve* at the table, rather than to claim the best seats of prestige and honor at the table. Honestly, if I picture a great feast table in God’s kingdom, I don’t see Jesus sitting enthroned at the head end; I see Jesus bringing over the basket of bread and serving those seated. That’s how God in Christ operates. God’s

table isn't just one more way for us to assert our rank and self-importance; it's a place for the diverse community of the church to come together in humble equality to both eat and to serve.

We see that in our table of Holy Communion, don't we? Every week we acknowledge that it's not *our* table, it's the *Lord's* table, and all are welcome. In the next week or two we'll be welcoming new members. And we'll hold a First Communion class in November, for several children. In essence, we are expanding our table, adding another leaf, to make room for more family members. We *are* the Body of Christ. We *are* the grateful recipients of grace at the Table of the Lord. We *are* the servers at the congregational table of welcome to others.

Given that we will be receiving new members into our congregation soon, let's think for a moment about what it means for any one of *us* to *be* a member of this congregation. At some point in time, one way or another, each of us was also a new member, right? What brought us here if we came as adults, on purpose? Or what has kept us here, if we were born and baptized into the congregation from early years on? Was it about prestige? Was it so that you could legally vote at congregational meetings? Was it so you could get the "members only" rate for weddings or funerals? Was it for the gifts of the picture directory, the new member's certificate you receive upon joining? I'm thinking it wasn't any of those things!

Now, I can't know this, but I'm guessing that we might come up with answers more like this: I joined this church, because I felt welcomed here. I found the worship and music inspiring. I discovered a community. I hope we might say those things, because they're all excellent reasons to join a church!

But, at a deeper level, I wonder if there is another truth? We joined here because there was a place here for us to *serve*. Because we aren't called *only* to be inspired and feel loved, but to *serve*. And so those folks who spent a lot of time "church shopping", should be asking not just how much they like the church, but if there is a place for them to serve in that church. How can a particular community of faith help us live out our call to service? These don't have to be shock-and-awe kinds of acts of service, but the living out of mercy, kindness,

and compassion for others in all the small ways we do, all the time, as followers of our Lord, as I was enumerating at the start of this service.

Yet, while our service may be simple and humble, I don't want to down play the significance of our service. Because to be our Lord's willing servants may mean giving up our agenda. James and John have an agenda, but it's not God's agenda, it's their own: to gain power and recognition, to be ranked number one. It might seem like it would be lovely if that *were* God's agenda for us, and a few hucksters out there may claim that it is, but that is categorically wrong. Every word in Scripture paints a picture for us of a God who serves and even suffers for our sake. Naturally, our agendas include personal success, but God's agenda is more about service. Sometimes, *our* agenda gets in the way of *God's* agenda, as in the case of James and John. And then we need to step back, recognize that God is God and we are not, and remember again that as followers of Christ, we let go of our own agenda to sit at those coveted spots in glory, and we look to instead take up God's agenda of service to others. We do this *not* as a sacrifice; not as a dutiful, yet resentful, joyless martyr; but as an *honor*. A life of service is an *honor*. A life of following Jesus and serving as He does is how we live out our faith, in response to God's many kindnesses, mercies, and blessings to us. Who will sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His glory? It couldn't matter less. Besides, Christ is likely not simply sitting basking in glory either, He's in the kitchen doing the dishes. It's not about sitting at the table on the right or the left, in the places of honor and prestige; it's about expanding our table and providing the warmest welcome and most genuine and faithful service that we can for others. This we do in Christ's name. Amen.