

Proper 24 B 2021
Mark 10:35-45

If you want some insight into the conflict between status and the gospel, the Art Museum is a good place to start. Among all the altarpieces and statues in the Early Christian Art wing are paintings by great masters from hundreds of years ago of scenes from the gospels, many done on commission. They depict the stories like the entry into Jerusalem, even the Crucifixion, and the patrons of these works had themselves painted among the disciples, who have just been told that they must give up all to follow. These are the nobility and the wealthy, mind you, without whom these masterworks would not exist, but to anyone who has been listening these past weeks, especially this morning, there is a profound dissonance between status and humility, these earls and barons having their feet bathed by Jesus or standing at the foot of the cross.

Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. The irony in James and John's request echoes like the dissonance in these pictures. Jesus has just made his last passion prediction before entering Jerusalem, words we don't hear this morning. Their appeal seems almost comical in the light of the suffering Jesus has just proclaimed to them for the third time. If we feel as though we have heard these words before, we have; they are the words of Herod to his daughter, the puppet ruler whose false status represents everything that Jesus is trying to take apart. If we are inclined to be hard on James and John for their deafness, asking their teacher for seats of glory on his right and left, the other disciples don't fare much better, arguing with the two about their request for preferential treatment. There is cluelessness all around about this scramble for the best seats in the house. It is no wonder that Jesus, probably after a long sigh, tells them that they do not understand what they are asking for, these upwardly-mobile disciples who cannot listen and yet to whom he has entrusted the kingdom.

In fact, we probably want to laugh at this whole tragic comedy until we take a closer look at our own lives. Who of us would turn down a promotion, citing our lack of worthiness or our desire to be servant of all? Has any of us met a high-school senior who struggles to pare-down his accomplishments on a college application? Academics play this status game and so, unfortunately, does the church—many are the arguments about who stands where in processions and gets to wear the extra regalia. There is nothing abnormal about wanting these things—we are human, after all—but they are bound-up with the idea that they are somehow independent of our discipleship, which is about how we serve one another. We all seem to have the same capacity for social-climbing in our DNA, just like these two sons of Zebedee. But the plumb-line for our lives is the model of suffering love in servanthood which, just outside the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus is going to demonstrate for all.

In case we need to be reminded what that suffering servanthood looks like, Isaiah provides it for us, that, "He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities/ upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed." These are Good Friday verses and we need them to remind us that status has no place in God's kingdom unless it is the status of servanthood, about one who is willing to give his life so we might understand that all who would be first must be servant of all.

At Jesus' own passion prediction, where Jesus tells the twelve, "the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again," Mark tells us that the disciples were both "amazed and afraid." It is fear that gets in the way of real discipleship and it is the enemy of all we do here. The promise of Jesus to the disciples is that they will drink from his cup and share in his baptism; the rest, as we will learn from the Passion, is in the hands of the Father. But in our community of faith, the way we negate this fear is

through the sacraments, the visible, outward signs of the love of God. They are centered on our baptism and the cup we all share each week. They are reminders of the depth of God's love, that we do not need to claw our way toward status or security and that the humility of servanthood, not social perks, is the mark to which we all are called.

There was a parish I would occasionally attend mid-week in downtown Atlanta that demonstrated this kind of servanthood. It was in a neighborhood that was just beginning to change: the cracked sidewalks were starting to be replaced and new trees were showing up in front of houses that were being renovated for the first time in decades. This was a parish that served the residents of group homes in the area; most of the members had mental disabilities and arrived on buses for a meal and an evening service. The rector of the church greeted me on the first day I attended and asked me to wait while excused he himself and brought back two slightly disheveled men who he seemed eager to have me know. "These are James and John", he said, adding, "the sons of thunder," as they looked down shyly. Part of their jobs, apparently, was to wipe down the cafeteria before everyone began eating. They turned out to be some of the most profound teachers that I had in that period of my life. No one, after all, could eat without their work being done. They were also present at any ordination I ever attended. They were as keen and supportive in my ministry as I was of theirs, mostly because of the humility that was clear in everything they did or said, and I am grateful to have had them as mentors in that part of my life.

The alternative to this fear, it seems to me, is a life lived out of grateful humility, even in precarious circumstances. Dorothy Day, another paradox who achieved fame while seeking obscurity serving the poor in NY, wrote, "Thank God I have this suffering of joblessness and insecurity and homelessness together with others. This day, for the sake of the family, there are so many compromises. But we must learn to accept this hardest of all sufferings, the suffering of those nearest and dearest to us. Thank God for this training in suffering.' Accepting this made it easier. Thank God for everything!"

Thank God for everything. If there is a cure for the "Zebedee DNA" that we all carry, it is in this humility and gratitude. In such a world, there are no winners and losers, none who are honored or shamed, only the clarity that endless striving undermines the people God wants us to be. I don't believe God calls us all to be self-serving benefactors, no matter how beautiful the result; the beauty ends, after all, when the music stops or the painting comes down. God wants our lives to be a thing of beauty, leavened by its own joy and sadness, lived fully in the service of the one who gave his life to serve us all.