

Sermon ✝ October 17, 2021
Mark 10:35-45
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James and John came forward to Jesus and made a bold request. *"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."* When the other ten disciples heard this request, they were angry.

I understand their anger. We understand their anger. We know these guys.

If you work or worked in an office, James and John represent that obnoxious guy in the office down the hall who is always trying to make himself look better than the other employees. Our kids have told us that it has gotten so competitive in the business world that there are employees who will set their alarm clocks for 2:30 a.m. so they can send an email . . . in hopes that the boss will notice how late into the night they work.

If you are or were a teacher, James and John represent the adequate, not-too-creative teacher who always dotes on the principal's every word at the staff meetings . . . leaning forward with a creepy smile that never quits.

And the clergy are not immune from such behavior. Anytime a group of us are together . . . and the bishop is in attendance . . . there are always one or two in the group who seem to spend considerable time and energy kissing up to the bishop in hopes that no one will notice.

We know these guys and it's frustrating! Why should James and John get special favors just because they know how to grease Jesus?
It isn't fair. And it angers us.

I understand James and John, too. I know that they are rude, crass, manipulative. But you run the race of life only once. So, you need to take advantage of every opportunity you can to get ready for what comes next, to make your mark.

A young family with several children is facing thousands upon thousands of dollars of college tuition. I can understand why the energetic, talented mother would want to get a promotion a few years early at work. A few hundred extra dollars in savings when the children are in preschool means thousands of extra dollars when they're in college. Isn't it worth it—for your kids—to try to get ahead?

And when you're sitting in the rocking chair at the senior citizens facility, you don't want to review your life with too many questions, too many regrets.

"What if..." . . . What if you had spoken to your boss about that idea?

What if you had put in for that promotion when you were young? Could you have made manager?

I do not like James' and John's request. But deep down, I understand it. Jesus' response re-frames the discussion. *"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"*

Jesus wants them to understand the nature of their call. Jesus' followers are not offered an executive suite on the top floor of life, with a private bathroom. Remember the scripture from a few weeks ago? What did Jesus say? *"Take up your cross, and follow me."*

The cup is the cup of suffering. And the baptism of which Jesus speaks is the baptism of his death.

Now, Jesus is not talking about suffering in general. Everybody suffers at one time or another. Just ask the parents of a hyperactive 15-year-old. Or the children whose father died in Afghanistan. Or the person who is being eaten away by cancer, day by day, cell by cell. This suffering is bitter, but it is not the pain of which Jesus speaks.

Jesus has in mind voluntary suffering for the sake of another person. Jesus is asking the disciples, *"Are you willing to put yourself on the line so that the lives of others might get better?"* Please understand: Jesus is not neurotic. He knows that the values and practices of God often conflict with the values and practices of the world.

Jesus calls the disciples to witness to God and God's ways. Sometimes people in the world reject them. And sometimes the rejection hurts and ends in suffering. You could say that Jesus is providing pastoral care in advance. He wants to prepare the disciples, ahead of time, for the conflicts in which they will find themselves. Sometimes when you try to stand up for God, other people try to stand on you.

A woman is on the job. She is harassed. She knows other women who are harassed. She knows that God wants all people to be able to work in dignity and freedom. She reports the harassment. A week later she is in the unemployment line.

A congregation is living in the 1950's. The pastor tells the community that they need to move on, toward the 21st century. Before you know, the pastor is the one who is moving on.

But why this emphasis on suffering? Why should the followers of Jesus drink the cup? be baptized with the baptism of Jesus' death?

Jesus tells us: “*whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*” Jesus changes the rules.

In a conventional power system, the question is always, “*What's in it for me?*” In a servant system, the question is always, “*What does the other need?*”

Servants are not focused on their own needs. They are focused on the needs of the others, and so they ask, “*What can I do to help the other person or community get to the optimum life for them?*” A servant looks at another person and does not see an enemy, but sees one in need.

In the process, the servant is transformed. The servant's center of attention is shifted from her or his own turf, money, power, and ego, to what is best for the other and for the community.

We end with a story . . . shared by a colleague.

Bob was a boomer, who was driven in everything he did. You know the kind: they wake up early in the morning with all their jets on high, and they roar full speed until late at night. They give every possible energy in every possible minute to their tasks. Before breakfast. Through the noon hour. At night. They can hardly relax. And even when they take an evening off from their tasks, they are still thinking about them.

Like many boomers, Bob was career-driven. Work. Work. Work. Everything revolved around doing the best possible job. As far as I know, Bob was not grubbing for money, or control, or recognition. He was totally committed because it was his nature to be totally committed.

Along the way, he took time out to get married. He married someone much like him: career-driven. Accidentally, I think, they had a baby. Bob loved the child, but the child distracted him from what he really wanted to do: work.

At night, you could see the conflict that Bob felt. He would be at the computer, working, and the toddler would toddle up. Bob would break from the keyboard long enough to acknowledge the child, but would re-direct his child's energy to some other activity in some other space. If the child didn't respond to the suggestion, you could hear the irritation in Bob's voice.

Then, Bob got caught in downsizing. He was gone from the company. With only one salary, the family could not continue full-time child-care. So Bob had to stay at home. With the child. All day. He felt sad, underutilized, imprisoned.

Gradually, he figured out that he could not distract the child all day every day. He realized that the child liked to do things with him. He found that he liked seeing her eyes light up when they were reading, or playing, or making a game out of cleaning up.

Slowly, to his surprise, he found that he was changed. Sure, he wanted to work again. In a few months he got a good job. And he worked hard. But he was different. His world was larger. He was more relaxed. His daughter was happier. His spouse was amazed. But he said it best, *"When I lost my job, I thought my child was my prison. Now, I know the old drive was my prison. And I am free."*

Servanthood is not just for the sake of others. Servanthood is not just a requirement that God lays on us. God can use our serving to reveal the life that God has for us. Indeed, Servanthood can be a means of grace.