**October 21, 2018**

**Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45**

If you’ve been in worship for the past few weeks reading Mark, several refrains are standing out in their repetition through these chapters. While the disciples wrestle with greatness and accolades in the ways that they help Jesus, he told them over and over again, “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” Jesus repeatedly called the disciples to be more like servants and slaves than like the religious and civic leaders they knew. He called them to humble service, not accolades and power. In these conversations, he often used children as his working example. “Look at these children. They *aren’t* great. They aren’t even trying to be great. Be like them.” Even though we can see these themes pop out of the text, the disciples still don’t get it.

In today’s passage, James and John display their ambition to be co-Vice Presidents whenever Jesus finally lands his post as top dog in the kingdom coming. Jesus responded, "You don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" And still they didn’t get it. “Bring it on! We can take it.” So Jesus granted them what they wanted – not the prestige, but the right to drink of the same cup he will drink. But since we know how the story will end, and we know what cup he will drink, we know that their question here will lead them to a very different end than they imagine.

We know the cup that Jesus will drink. We know that the baptism that he will face is a public execution on a traitor’s cross, and we know (at least so the story goes) that James will become a martyr while John, according to tradition, will be the only one of the 12 disciples who doesn’t die as a result of his following Jesus. These two key players are talking to Jesus here: the first to die and the one who will *watch* the rest of his brother disciples die because of what they believed and who they followed.

At this point in the Gospel, the disciples didn’t know what would happen, though the teacher certainly did. Jesus gave this explanation: “In the world around us, powerful people lord it over others. Powerful people put others in their places. In the kingdoms of this world, the tyranny of power and wealth and prestige reign… but this is not for you. The world you *want* to be a part of doesn’t work that way. The one who would be great, must be a *slave* of all…” James and John got quiet as they considered this once more. *Slaves*?! Not even, not *just* slaves to Jesus, but slaves to the rest of the world?

This passage could be a reason that we all buckle down and work harder and do more and give more. But there are some people here who *already* do a lot. If those people aren’t sitting next to you then they probably are you. So maybe this passage is an encouragement for those who *already* do more – you’re doing good work. You’re doing faithful work. You are what the rest of us look to as a model for following Jesus.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested that the heart of this invitation is surrender. Surrender the Drum Major Instinct: the desire for attention, or to get ahead, to prove ourselves. Dr. King suggested that racism (and most -isms) grow out of the drum major instinct – a need to feel superior. A need to feel that you are first. It’s the shadow side of ambition.

Ambition can inspire us to do our best, and it can, very literally, kill us. Dr. King recognized that the desire to be the best instead of *doing* your best meant someone else had to be on the bottom, and race was as good a reason as any other to keep someone down. King went onto note that “this perverted use of the drum major instinct… has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man.” If you think about it for a moment, you remember that (1) Hitler proposed the superiority of the Aryan race as a way to solidify his rule, and exterminate seven million people, not to mention the millions who died in the war to stop him. (2) You remember the belief in manifest destiny – that it was God’s will for white Europeans to dominate North America led to the subjugation and killing of millions of Native Americans. (3) You remember that it is the demonization of The Other that motivates sectarian violence around the world, especially ongoing conflicts in Syria, Myanmar and even our own country; the refrain “Make America Great Again” lifts *us* (a mysterious insider “us”) above others who are not part of that *chosen* vision of America. (pause) When we have to have the *best* seat in the house, we become less than human because we make those who aren’t “best” or “great” less than.

Jesus answered James and John by flipping their Drum Major Instinct from one that promotes self into one that serves others. Jesus instructed them not to use power to *control* others, but to use it to serve and lift up others. In doing so, Jesus said something very powerful about what it means to be his disciple – something that largely eluded the church for the 1700 years that earthly and church power went hand in hand…

At Sweet Hollow, our reason for being is not to be the most beloved or popular congregation on Long Island; rather, our purpose is to serve. It is our job to be slaves for the world, not slaves *of* the world, for we serve no master but the God who made us. By offering ourselves for the world, just as Jesus offered himself, we join with the Holy Spirit already at work, changing the destructive patterns and behaviors of our world as we use all our gifts, powers, and resources daily serving and lifting up others.

The Presbyterian minister, Rev. Fred Rogers, who was known on television as “Mr. Rogers,” well used his own gifts and power to daily serve and lift up the least of these. He spent his career humbly serving children in humble ways – without fancy graphics or sounds or props. His wife and others have frequently said that the Mr. Rogers we saw on television was the real Mr. Rogers. He wasn’t living in character. He was honestly living out the truth of who he was and what he believed. In his induction to the TV Hall of Fame, Fred said that “Fame is a four-letter word. And like ‘tape’ or ‘zoom’ or ‘face’ or ‘pain’ or ‘life’ or ‘love’ what ultimately matters is what we do with it. Those of us in television are chosen to be servants. It doesn’t matter our particular job. We are chosen to help meet the deeper needs of those who listen, day and night. … How do we make goodness attractive? To do whatever we can to bring courage to those who lives move near our own. By treating our neighbor at least as well as we treat ourselves. And allowing that to inform everything that we produce.”

I wonder if we are so faithful in our discipleship. Do we allow Christ’s call to inform everything we produce, everything we say and do and give. ??? Is Christ’s call at the heart of each decision the church officers make? Is Christ’s call in the mind of every pumpkin patch volunteer? Is Christ’s call at hand when we listen to our friends and go to work and pass strangers in the street? Does Jesus’ invitation to servanthood inform *everything* that we produce, do and say?

Retired Methodist Bishop and Dean of the Chapel at Duke Divinity School, Will Willimon, said that contemporary Christians are reluctant to proclaim and practice this message; after all, *we* are independent self-actualized people. We will be slaves to no one. As Willimon pointed out, this is not about empowering those who would exploit us; this is about following the loving, self-sacrificial example of Jesus. He noted, “Jesus is not a technique for getting what we want out of God; Jesus is God's way of getting what God wants out of us. God wants a world, a world redeemed, restored… And the way God gets that is with ordinary people like us who are willing to walk like Jesus, talk like Jesus, yes, and even if need be to suffer like Jesus.”

Dr. King concluded his aforementioned sermon by suggesting that we reimagine our drum major desires away from ourselves, to seek instead to be drum majors, in his words, “for justice…for peace…for righteousness.” “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, …not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.”

The invitation to slavery…not slavery to one class or one way of life, but slavery to all, is an invitation to participate in our own salvation. Saved from the poison of worldly ambition for the transformation of the world. The good news is that the one who was the first slave for all has already made that salvation real, has made the servant’s cup not simply a cup of sacrifice, but a cup of joy—not just at that table—but every day. Thanks be to God.

<http://northminpres.org/dev123/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/10.18.15.The-Best-Seat-in-the-House.mark-10.35-45.pdf>