

“To Serve”

*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).*

Our world is plagued by pride. In this election year, we see it every day, and yet we don't need to look to Washington to find examples of pride. We see it in our kids, we witness it at work, and we can all think of a time when we have promoted ourselves or lobbied for preferential treatment. Pride is poison. It turns us in on ourselves and blinds us to the needs of others, and, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus confronts the problem of pride in two of His dearest disciples. James and John were especially close to Jesus. Along with Peter, these men formed an inner circle among the disciples, and yet, in their pride, they approached Jesus with a ridiculous request, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (Mark 10:35).

Not only do these brothers have the audacity to approach Jesus with their arrogant demand, but Jesus gives them an equally odd answer: “What do you want me to do for you?” This response is curious because, in the first few verses of today's reading, Jesus told them *exactly* what He would be doing for them. He said, “we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise” (Mark 10:33-34). Without any ambiguity, Jesus told them that in a matter of weeks, He would be betrayed, mocked, beaten, and executed, and in response, they said, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask.” Their request is absurd and completely misses the point and yet, Jesus seems to play along: “What do you want me to do for you?” And James and John jump right in.

Showing just how little they understood about who Jesus was and why he had come, the brothers make their ask, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). There it was! After three years of following Jesus; after hearing Him teach and preach; after watching the blind receive sight, the deaf hear, and the dead rise; after Jesus had specifically told them what was about to happen in Jerusalem; these vain brothers are trying to secure a position of privilege and power. They want to make sure that they have a place of honor with Jesus as He established His kingdom. Their minds were set on a worldly definition of glory, one that was based on earthly authority, *and Jesus' death was nowhere in their thinking.*

In a response that foreshadows Jesus' words from the Cross, He tells them they have no clue what they're talking about: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” When John and James answered that they could, Jesus must have responded in a tone that matched the conceit of their question, because the disciples started to pick up on the vibe of the conversation, and when the other “ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.” If you ever want to see the morale of an organization fall off a cliff, whether it's in a classroom, an athletic team, a workplace, or a family, the perception of preferential treatment will cause instant division.

The jealousy of the other ten disciples is totally understandable, and, as tempers began to rise within the group, Mark tells us that, “Jesus called them together” to address the issue face to face. Rather than let the harmony of the group continue to erode, Jesus took this opportunity to teach an important lesson about the Kingdom. And He began by drawing on their disdain of their common Roman enemy: “You

know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” Now, this was something they all understood. This was the way of the world. Those with power, use it. Those with muscle, flex it. After all, what good was authority unless it could be leveraged? The disciples saw the Romans doing this every day and they were disgusted by it in the same way we are disgusted when we hear about corporate or governmental abuses of power. But then Jesus’ teaching took an unexpected turn: “But it shall not be so among you.” In these words, Jesus made the point that life in the Kingdom of God is not like life in the world, and disciples of Christ don’t act like the world. The follower of Christ does not manipulate people or wield power or misuse authority for selfish gain. The Kingdom of God is different.

“But it shall not be so among you.” These words must have shocked the disciples, and, today, these words should also challenge us, because in these words, Jesus confronts us with the truth that we have not lived lives that reflect the Kingdom of God. We *have* taken advantage of others. We *have* sought preferential treatment. We all look for ways to promote and justify ourselves, and in our sinful pride, we always seek to be served. The truth is, we are no different than the brash brothers in today’s reading, and we are no more forgiving than the ten disciples who took delight in their indignation.

In this reading, Jesus unmasks the self-righteous, self-promoting way of the world, and He redefines greatness. Jesus says, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” In these words, Jesus shows us a new way; one that is based on humility; one that is found in service and self-sacrifice; and, it was a way that Jesus was about to create through the Cross.

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). The Greek word that Jesus used for “serve” has more than one definition. It can mean simply serving a meal like we might find in the action of a waiter or waitress, but it can also mean *to supply the things necessary for life*, and, as Jesus closes out this section of Scripture, He removes any doubt as to how this life-giving, life-sustaining service will be offered: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And this is where true greatness is seen!

As Jesus points to the ransom that He is about to pay for sinful humanity, He is fulfilling the Words of today’s reading from Jeremiah: “Behold, the days are coming...when I will make a new covenant...For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jeremiah 31:31, 34). And, this connection is clarified in Hebrews where we read: “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free” (Hebrews 9:15, NIV).

In the Cross of Jesus Christ, we are served and we are saved. We are rescued from ourselves, we are delivered from the guilt of our broken promises and freed from our sinful pride, and, in His forgiveness, *our hearts are changed forever!* Through Christ’s service to us, we have been given eternal life, and we also have the power to be different from the world *today*; to walk a new way, and to live as disciples of Christ and children of God; not to be served, but to serve.

We are people for whom greatness has been redefined, and through whom the love of God will be shared. To be great is to serve. That’s what Christ has done for you, and that’s what He will do *through* you today. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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