

It's Your Serve

Mark 10:35-45 Preached May 3, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Introduction. Have you ever had someone say to you, "Would you do me a favor?" If so, you probably asked what the person wanted before saying, "Yes."

A group of men were going hunting out in the country. The driver of the car stopped to ask a farmer if they could hunt on his property. The farmer said, "Sure. But I want you to do me a favor. See that mule in the field. She is really old and is dying of cancer. I just do not have the heart to put her down. Would you do it?" The hunter responded, "I will." As he got back into the car, he thought he would play a joke on his partners. One asked, "What did the farmer say?" The driver said, "He said, 'No.' But I will show him." So he took out the gun and shot the ailing mule. A few seconds later a second shot rang out from the passenger's side.

"There," said the fellow hunter, "I got his cow too."

Asking for favors has long been a common practice. Our scripture lesson begins with two of the disciples coming to Jesus to ask a favor. Their approach was rather direct and forward – "We want you to do for us whatever we ask." Jesus was wise to inquire what they wanted before he agreed to grant the favor.

Ambition. What did these two disciples want? They wanted Jesus to appoint one of them to sit on his right and one on his left when he came into his glory. When Jesus' time arrived and he was put in charge of God's kingdom, they wanted to be his top two cabinet officials – Chief of Staff and Secretary of State. They wanted the two greatest seats of honor and responsibility.

Given the role these two had played on Jesus' team, their request does not seem out of line. James, John and Peter made up a trio in the inner circle with Jesus. In the gospels we see they are with Jesus in some of the more intimate moments of ministry when the others were excluded. They were present when Jesus raised Jarius' daughter from death, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain with Moses and Elijah and invited to be at a place closest to him while he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Surely it would be two of these three who would be number 1 and 2 in the kingdom.

Would it be fair to say that their request revealed they were ambitious? In the context of our Christian faith, is ambition bad?

We are nurtured in a culture where ambition is highly valued. We celebrate one who is motivated to achieve and reach the top more than one who is apathetic and does not want to advance. We want the athlete on our team who wants to be and works at becoming the number one starting pitcher. We want the trumpeter who desires to be first chair and puts her all into practice. We admire the student who seeks to excel and be at the top of the class. We appreciate people who want to excel in their vocations.

In church life, ambition is better than apathy. As a pastor, I want to be effective and successful. I want the church I serve to be healthy and to grow. Most of us agree it is exciting to see inspiring leadership among lay people in the church. Our hope is that our teachers will desire to be effective and see their classes filled with people. For most of us, we appreciate ambition in the context of church life.

Some might want to argue that ambition for believers is bad or unhealthy. Of course it can be when it becomes divisive or is motivated by selfish desires. One commentator points out about this passage that Matthew differs from Mark in that James and John's mother asks for the positions for her sons. The commentator asserts that Matthew must have felt it was below the character of James and John to ask for those positions.

It is clear that humility is a high virtue for every follower of Jesus Christ. Humility is not a reason for any of us to be content with mediocrity or failure in our personal life, vocation or church. Being humble does not mean we do not want to succeed and to advance. I firmly believe that God wants each of us to succeed and become all we were created to be.

It is interesting that Jesus did not condemn or chide James and John for their ambitious request. His response to their request and the reaction of the other disciples clarified two important matters related to their desire: 1) the role God plays in our service and advancement and 2) the cost that must be paid.

God chooses our place, position and post. Jesus shared with James and John a reality that is critical for us to understand and has a direct connection to EMIM campaign. Jesus explains that he could not decide to give them that position because it is a matter that is decided by his Father in heaven (see Matthew 20:23).

Many in my generation who grew up in the Christian faith are familiar with an evangelism tool called *The Four Spiritual Laws*. The first "law" says, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."

Through many years of study and experience, I have not found sufficient evidence to counter these two claims – God does love everyone and he has a plan for our lives.

Each of us is a unique, unrepeatable miracle of God. There is no other person on this globe exactly like you. God gives to us unique gifts, skills, passions and experiences. These form a design that shapes us for a special place in ministry within his kingdom. I believe the implicit message in Jesus' reply to the disciples is that God chooses our place, position and post in ministry.

Have you ever put together a large puzzle? Often you will find pieces of the puzzle that are similar and perhaps difficult to tell apart. But if you attempt to put a piece in the wrong place, it will not fit correctly. The part of the picture it plays will become distorted. Each piece of the puzzle has a particular place.

God has designed the church (both with capital "C" and lower case "c") so that each member has a special place and role in ministry. Paul wrote about this when he said, "*From (Jesus) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work* (Ephesians 4:16).

Not every person can serve as the Sr. Pastor of FCUMC. Basically, one person holds that position at a time. Not everyone can serve as chair of Church Council – it is a one person at a time job. Not everyone can teach the Morgan SS class or rock a particular baby in the nursery or run the sound system, etc. God has equipped some to serve in one of these areas of ministry. EMIM is a system we use to help people think and pray about where God wants them to serve.

While God has designed us for a particular place, position and post, we must cooperate with God's plan. If we fail to do so, either by not serving or doing someone else's job, the puzzle is never completed as it should be. There are "holes" in the puzzle and people are not reached and served as God desires. Where does God want you to serve?

As last year ended, the person who had been directing IHN here at First-Centenary came and expressed that she believed it was time to step down from that position. She had given much of

herself over a number of years. We were not sure what we needed to do. We had contacted Mary Ellen Galloway, who is the area director, about not knowing if we could continue until we had the leadership. In the midst of that situation, one of our newer members Thom Coombs came to Brian and said he would like to lead it. Two weeks ago, he led the way as we hosted IHN. Things went well and the team did a great job. He reported that it was the most satisfying experience of his life. Thom answered the call.

The Cost of Ambition. Jesus made it clear to James and John that there was a cost related to their ambition. He asked them if they could "drink the cup" he drank from and be "baptized" with the same baptism. These were powerful metaphors that drew from their Jewish heritage.

The cup and baptism that Jesus encountered were filled with suffering and sacrifice. In the passage preceding our lesson, Jesus had shared with his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and there he would be arrested and executed. To fulfill God's plan, Jesus faced suffering. In the Garden he had prayed for the "cup" to pass from him.

For us today, the "cup" and "baptism" have sacramental significance. The cup we raise at this table is one of suffering and sacrifice. As we share the cup, we share in Jesus' suffering and sacrifice. Our baptism is a sharing in Christ's life of suffering and sacrifice.

When we serve, there is suffering and sacrifice. These come in many forms, typically not the giving of our lives to death, but for some that may be true. Suffering may come in the compassion we feel for others whose lives are being destroyed by their actions or circumstances. Suffering may come when we are rejected by some or ridiculed. Sacrifice is present in giving of time and our resources in ministry – being here when there might be something else that is interesting to do.

When the other 10 learned what James and John wanted, they were irritated. I imagine jealousy was taunting their souls. Their reaction led Jesus to contrast what is present in the dominant culture of our world and the culture of God's kingdom. What he said alerts us to the second cost of spiritual ambition.

Jesus said that in the world those who hold the high places of authority and leadership often get their position and keep it by "lording over" others and exercising their authority by compulsion. By force of their strength, position, threat or grit, they rise to and stay in power. They rise up on the backs of others. (What was true 2,000 years ago in this regard is still true today whether we are speaking of the state, business or institutions.)

Jesus then shared that things for his followers are different. To get to the top position or to be in first place or to be important does not happen by these means. Remember this, no one rises higher by stepping on others and pushing them down.

Jesus asserted that anyone who follows him, who wants to be great, must become a servant. The word translated here as servant is **διάκονος**, where we get the word deacon. The **διάκονος** is one who serves at a table, one who helps others. Greatness comes by helping and serving others. Jesus strengthened that statement by saying that any of his followers who wanted to be first must become a slave. His followers must serve and give themselves to others. Serving becomes the way to greatness in the kingdom.

In 1970, Robert Greenleaf wrote an article, *The Servant as Leader*. In the article he wrote, *The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first*. Greenleaf contrasted this with the *leader-first* model which was motivated to acquire power and possessions. While Greenleaf was tagged with the title of the Father of Servant-Leadership, his thoughts echo what Jesus taught. The Servant-Leader concept has been one that is advocated in many arenas outside the Church.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to serve – servant first attitude. We find this attitude in Christ. He did not come into our world to be served but to serve. He gave a vivid example when at the last supper he girded himself with a towel, took a bowl of water and washed the feet of the disciples. He was the example of one who served.

In a moment, you will be invited to come to this table to receive the One who

serves humanity. As you come, you are asked to bring your commitment forward and place it in the bowl. By doing so, you commit yourself to serve.