

Sermon: **Not to be Served, but to Serve**

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Reverend James R. Henry
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church
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Our Gospel lesson text is essentially a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. The dialogue carries the message. Listen carefully to the conversation and allow the Spirit of God to draw you into conversation with Christ today.

"We want..." We want. Don't we all?

"We want you to do..." We want you to do something.

"We want you to do for us..." You, do for us.

"We want you to do for us *whatever we ask of you.*" Whatever.

It seems a presumptuous request, if not downright ludicrous. But that's what James and John said to Jesus.

Without missing a beat Jesus replied, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

They said, "Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one on your left in your glory."

James and John aspire to greatness. They have set their sights high. In their ambition for greatness these two disciples step forward and ahead of the other ten to position themselves alongside power... to connect with one who has power to do for them what they want. They seek the top two seats of glory for themselves.

Are they egotists, full of themselves? Are they zealots, full of Jesus and aspiring to every opportunity to promote the cause of his kingdom? Time will tell.

Whatever; you have to give them this... they know what they want and they go for it.

We are taught and we learn early that if you are going to get ahead in life you have to know what it is you want and where you have to be to get it. Then you go for it and make it happen. You network with people that can help you make it happen and you ask for what you want.

You have to know what you want, and you have to go for it. And James and John are doing a splendid job. So will their ambition and their efforts get them what they want?

Jesus kindly said, "You don't know what you are asking." You know what you want. You want the positions of glory, but you don't know what those positions are about. You don't know how one might ascend to such exalted seats of glory. You don't know the path to glory. You don't know what it will mean for you to ultimately sit there.

They were eager to be exalted with Jesus, sitting in the glory seats on the left and right, but they were not anticipating that Jesus would soon be hanging on a cross with thieves hanging on the left and right.

"You don't know what you are asking." Jesus doesn't rebuke them for not understanding. How could they know what was yet to be? Yet three times Jesus had spoken very plainly of his soon rejection, suffering and death, and what it will mean for any who will follow him. The first time, Peter rebukes Jesus for such talk. The second time Mark tells us that the disciples didn't understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask, and immediately reverted to their own concerns, arguing among themselves as to who among them was the greatest. The third time is recorded in the verses just prior to our lesson text.

Jesus took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and 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."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

Jesus says, "Well, let's see... do you really want to sit with me where I sit? Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" He uses two Old Testament metaphors that would have been familiar to James and John. The cup was often referred to as the cup of wrath or the cup of suffering. Baptism was a kind of overwhelming flood. "Are you able to drink *that* cup? Are you able to be baptized with *that* baptism?"

"We are able", they say. But were they? Time would show that they were not... at least not until after the resurrection when they finally came to know what they were now asking. But at this point, they did not know what they were asking.

Someone put it well, saying that they had "left fishing nets to follow Jesus but they were still caught in a cultural net." They lived in a system of hierarchical structures and powers. Rulers dominated their subjects. The higher class of life could buy and demand services at the expense of the more vulnerable. This was the established way of thinking and living for James and John, and perhaps too typical of our lives as well.

At birth we want what we want and we cry instinctively to be held, fed and changed. All through our younger years of sibling rivalries we demand what we assume to be ours. We ask for what we want, not knowing what we are asking for, and when denied, we fuss. We engage in playground spats, and use spit and fists to get what we want. We all grow up knowing what we want and, in one way or another, going for it, till we ultimately work our way to success, ownership, position and some degree of power. Many become great... great indeed... in the realm of our culture and world.

That's the way it was for James and John, and for us. But Jesus said to his followers, "It is not so among you." Greatness in the realm of his Kingdom comes by embracing a way of life that is counter to our world's establishment. Jesus completely deconstructs the common idea of greatness and the usual means of attaining greatness when he says, "Whoever wishes to become great *among you* must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first *among you* must be slave of all." Then he declares, "I came not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."

Jesus says, Would you aspire to true greatness? Do you really want to sit with me in glory? Then come now, and follow me... drink my cup... be baptized into my death, burial and resurrection, and into a completely new heart and a whole new way of living, and be a part of a new creation... the reclamation of humanity and the restoration of life as it was intended to be.

We, like James and John, are easily caught in *our* cultural web, chasing greatness for ourselves. But Jesus says we must distinguish ourselves as his followers saying, It will not be so among us. We will live not to be served, but to serve.

Early in my ministry, my wife gave me a very special gift that has been on my desk for many years. It's an old glass paperweight. She removed the picture that was original and replaced it with the cross-stitched words, *Not to be served... but to serve*. It has been a good admonition to me each time I sit at my desk.

May I suggest that it is a good watchword for you. Tomorrow morning and ach morning as you rise to meet a new day, pray: "Dear Lord, I want you to do for me what I ask." And as the Lord would reply, "What is it you want me to do for you?", pray: "Help me to live this day, not to be served, but to serve.

Amen.