

In the Name of the Living God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

James and John, sons of Zebedee, had traveled with Jesus for three years. Yet, it is easy for us to point the finger at them and wonder, “Where have they been?” because you and I have read the script of this drama. But they are living this drama, and still they want to assume positions of leadership that would give them great prestige, satisfy their egos, and give them power over others. They were full of themselves...so much so, that they said to Jesus: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” How is that for self confidence? Nothing like highlighting and underscoring the general theme of asking “So, what is in it for me?”

They want to be big in his coming kingdom. After all, like the others, they dropped everything to follow him, and dragged along with him for three long and hard years, collecting the attention and animosity of the Romans, the Jewish religious leaders, everybody.

What is interesting is that this is the third version of a significant theme found in Mark’s gospel: Jesus pronounces to his disciples an awareness of what will happen to him in Jerusalem and, each time, his listeners offer a stark contrast in reply. The first is sandwiched between Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Peter’s rebuke of Jesus for announcing his death. The second at 9:31 is immediately followed by the disciples’ argument about who was the greatest. So, we are prepared in this week’s readings to expect some contrasting misunderstanding following Jesus’ statement in Chapter 10, verse 33 which is just before our reading today.

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, spit upon him, flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.

This time, it is James and John who follow Jesus’ pronouncement with a request that shows how little they have learned. Instead of acknowledging his anticipation of suffering and death, they imagine a triumphant, regal scene with themselves sitting in positions of honor and power at King Jesus’ right and left. It is not a matter of leaping to an expectation of the glory of the post-resurrection Jesus. They simply have not heard Jesus at all, or refused to hear the dire news, even though he has repeated the prediction three times.

“You do not know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them, his jaw probably on the ground out of shock. What is with these two? Did they forget the rich man we heard about last Sunday? What about the reference to the children? And what of the prediction by Jesus as to what would soon happen to him? It does not take much imagination to hear the edgy rise in his voice to them.

Jesus asks if they can drink from the same “cup” of suffering and death he must drink, a cup that he himself will later ask be removed if possible?

Can they be baptized with the same baptism he is to endure? Still clueless, James and John

affirm that they can and, surprisingly, Jesus says that they will....by the time that Mark's gospel is written, James will have been killed by Herod Agrippa I in 44 C.E. for his role as a leader in the Jerusalem church, while the fate of John is uncertain.

The others got angry as well...not because they may have misunderstood his teachings, but rather because they were looking to get ahead in line. Like at the checkout at the supermarket. Line jumping. But the gospel presents Jesus as being the patient teacher, explaining that there is great, and then there is great. Being great on earth means having power and control over the other guy, but in having divine greatness....being a leader in the eyes of God...means taking a back seat, or no seat.

Jesus has to call them together and tries to describe how the dominion of God is different than the dominions of the world. He refers to those who are regarded as rulers in the pagan world of the Roman Empire. They (quote) lord it over (unquote) their subjects, and the verb here uses the same root as is used to refer to the real "Lord." Their great ones exercise authority as tyrants, an authority that stands in contrast to the edifying and restorative authority displayed by Jesus.

Yet again, Jesus tries to redefine what it means to be first and great. In Chapters 9 and 10, Jesus had said that to be first required being last and servant of all, and he had demonstrated what this looks like in God's dominion as he welcomed children. Here, he repeats the concept.

To be great is to be a servant. That certainly challenges normal expectations, but even in antiquity, there was appreciation for rulers who provided public service. However, Jesus pushes matters to an extreme when he goes on to say that to be first is to be a slave of all. Slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder, and there was no honor or reward in working for others as a slave.

Being a servant to others.

But who are the examples we see?

In preaching on this gospel reading in the past, I had named Elliot Spitzer, Bernie Madoff, and Martha Stewart, and I am sure that you can pick up where I left off. .

There are examples all around us in the secular hunt for greatness...climbing that ladder, often in relatively slow motion on top of the backs of others....only see their victims pass by later as they drop in a free-fall. Our own examples may not be as dramatic, not as scandalous. But try as we might, all too often our own actions show the motivations arising from this world, and less of the divine.

To be great in God's eyes is to be a servant modeled after Jesus' own life of service. For many listeners, the story of James and John is disconcerting because if James and John, who knew Jesus personally, could not figure out his teachings into their lives, how on earth are we to do so?

By being mindful of who it is that calls us to serve. We should remember that in all things we serve God, and God alone. By becoming more aware of God's presence in everyday life, we can begin to understand that all we do is somehow of God. Even the most mundane tasks that might not usually be associated with our spiritual lives can be viewed as service.

This concept is not simply a theoretical proposition, nor is it given as a command only to Jesus' disciples. At verse 45, Jesus indicates what it means for himself. Like his disciples, he did not come to be served but to serve.

But Jesus is more than an exemplary servant. He also came "to give his life as a ransom for many" which is important for thinking about how Jesus understood his ministry. It has often been read in comparison with the "servant" in Isaiah 53 and used to think of Jesus' death in terms of a substitute atonement or as a guilt offering for the sins of the world.

That could be true, but there is nothing here about appeasing God or providing a sacrifice. Instead, it is better to think of Jesus as one who takes the form of a slave himself and was obedient to the point of death on the cross, thereby providing the ransom that frees us who were slaves of this world and captive to death.

When Jesus gives his life as a ransom, he frees us not to become great as the world understands greatness, but to serve others as slaves of God.

In the words of a saint in our time, Bob Dylan: "You're gonna have to serve somebody."

After the birth of her first child, one young mother admitted to a difficult transition from being in the paid workforce to being a stay-at-home mother. But, with spiritual direction, she walked with the baby everyday and learned to become aware of her surroundings and being alert to where God might be. She recalled seeing nature and the created order, as well as the hectic pace of those around her, in a new way during these walks. She also began to see her tasks, such as the endless piles of laundry that had to be washed, as a service of love.

Jesus asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said yes, and were able to live into it. They eventually drank from the cup that Jesus drank from, and they learned what it means to serve.

We come to the altar to drink from the cup as well...and rather than the mind-set and world-view of "What's in it for me?", may we be able to respond to the question of Jesus with the mind-set and world view of "What can I do for you?"

So, what can I do for you, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Amen.