

Sunday, October 21, 2018
22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24 (Year B)
Mark 10.35-45
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

When I was a kid, my father was sent overseas twice. When I was in first grade, he was sent to Vietnam, and when I was in fifth grade, he was sent to Okinawa. Whenever he was transferred overseas, my mother, sister, and I would move back to my parents' home town in Kansas, where the grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins all lived. This way, we had an extensive support system during my father's absence. What I particularly remember and cherish about this time were big family gatherings for Sunday dinners, as well as for holidays. At such events, like in many larger families, the adults had their own table in the dining room, with the nice dishes and silverware. And then there was the "kiddie table" – card tables in the kitchen or living room, generally set-up with the everyday dishes and silverware. When I was in first grade, this was fine. It was fun to hang out with my cousins at the kiddie table. But when I was in the fifth grade, I really didn't want to be at the kiddie table. I was among the older of the cousins and didn't want to be with the "little kids." I wanted to be at the table with the grown-ups. I wanted to feel special. I just knew that when I finally made it to the grown-up table, it would be glorious!

This is the image that comes to mind when I think about James and John going to Jesus. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk 10.37). They want to be exalted. To be put in an honored position so everyone will know just how special they are to Jesus. That they have a special connection with Jesus that no one else shares—not even the other disciples. And as a result, they will have power and prestige in the kingdom of heaven.

When I finally had the opportunity to sit at the grown-up table, I discovered that it wasn't all that I had thought it would be. Sure, there was the initial thrill. But then I quickly discovered that the grown-up table really wasn't where I was meant to be. The adults had their own adult conversations that, at the age of 11 or 12, I could basically follow, but were actually pretty boring—at least to a kid. Not stuff that I particularly cared about or could contribute to. Looking into the living room at the kiddie table, it looked like they were having more fun than at the grown-up table. Sitting at the grown-up table, at least at that age, was not quite as glorious as I had imagined.

So, too, with James and John. They thought being at the "adult table" with Jesus would be so much fun. But at least in their case, Jesus warned them. He told them what to expect. They didn't have to find out for themselves. Although, to be honest, they should have been able to figure out what their request would entail. Right before the scene in today's Gospel, Jesus delivers the third and final prediction of his Passion. "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" (Mk 10.33-34). And it's right after this that the Zebedee boys go to Jesus and make their request? Really? You want to share in Jesus' glory? You do realize that means humiliation, torture, and death, don't you?

And yet, despite what Jesus had just told them, they make their request. They obviously did not get what Jesus had said about what would happen to him. So Jesus tells them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mk 10.38). The cup that he will drink was a common metaphor of the day for suffering—the suffering that Jesus had predicted he will have to endure in Jerusalem. A cup that Jesus will be called upon to drink, but one that even he himself does not want to drink from. Where in the Garden of Gethsemane, immediately before his arrest, Jesus will fervently pray, “remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want” (Mk 14.36b).

And similarly, the baptism that Jesus is baptized with is an allusion to his own baptism in the River Jordan, whereupon Jesus was immediately driven into the wilderness where he was tempted and tested by the devil—a grueling experience. Another metaphor for a time of trial and suffering. Only this time, it will be far worse. It will be a time of suffering that leads to death.

Nonetheless, James and John are confident in their abilities to follow Jesus wherever it will lead them. Even though the reality is that they will flee at the first sign of trouble when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. And still, James and John think they want to follow Jesus in his ordeal, in his Passion, and to be granted places of honor at Jesus’ right and at his left, in his glory. They want the glory, yes. What it takes to get there, not so much.

In an ironic twist of fate, at his crucifixion, Jesus is abandoned by all his disciples, including James and John. As he prepares for death, as he enters into glory, Jesus sits not on a throne but hangs on a cross. But he is indeed flanked on his right and his left by two companions. Just not by James and John, not by any trusted assistants, but by two bandits. A place of honor? The two bandits may think otherwise.

As Jesus attempts to convey to James and John the gravity of what they ask—something that will not come to pass, at least for them—he uses the occasion of their self-centered request to teach a lesson. Not just for James and John, but for all the disciples who are listening in. The disciples who are angry that the sons of Zebedee made this outlandish request. But truth be told—at least, as I see it—the other ten disciples are as guilty of hubris as James and John. They are angry because James and John beat them to the punch. That James and John had the nerve to ask Jesus for what each of them secretly wanted for themselves. To be exalted. To be honored. To be first among the disciples and all of Jesus’ followers.

Jesus tells them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10.42-45).

This statement is a game-changer. The values of the kingdom of God are a complete reversal of the values of the dominant culture. Of the dominant culture of Jesus’ day and of our own day.

“In a society that prized power, status, and honor, the followers of Jesus were to take a different path—that of servant leadership” (*Synthesis*, Proper 24, October 21, 2018). True honor in God’s kingdom is not found in being in an exalted position, but in becoming as a servant to all. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” This is Jesus’ definition of what it means to engage in ministry. Of what it means to follow him. That glory in the kingdom of God is about humility, service, and love. Particularly love of the “least” of God’s beloved children.

As those who follow Christ, we, by default, by virtue of our baptisms, buy into this reversal of values. This is reiterated in many ways. Particularly when we regularly pray the Lord’s Prayer. When we pray “thy kingdom come” we are saying that we agree with these kingdom values and that we are praying that they will be brought to fruition. We are agreeing to seek to live these values in our own lives and ministries. We are agreeing to allow ourselves to be transformed by these values. That we recognize we ourselves are called not to be served, but to serve.

We seek to live into these transformed values, into this transformed life, in tangible ways. That is what our stewardship theme for this year—Transforming Generosity—is all about. To demonstrate this transformation through a generosity of who we are—through our use of time, treasure, and talents. Generously given to us by God, and a portion of which we generously give back to him as a way of living more fully into Christ’s vision of ministry. Not to be served, but to serve. Not to be served by the church, but to serve the church, the Body of Christ. Not to be served by others, but to serve others,

We follow the one who sacrificed himself for us by living a life of service, by giving of himself for our sake. So that we ourselves will not have to be sacrificed unto death. So that we don’t have to rely on our own abilities to obtain salvation. So that instead we may live an abundant life. So that we might give out of that abundance, that others may also experience God’s love.

As followers of Christ, we continually seek to live into a transformed vision of God’s kingdom in which it is not a select few who are exalted at Jesus’ right hand and at his left, but where all are placed in positions of honor. Where God’s beloved children are not separated, some sitting at kiddie tables and some sitting at grown-up tables, but where all are gathered around one table—God’s table—sharing in community and humbly serving one another in love. When that happens, we will all be exalted in Christ’s glory.