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Susanna M. Kawolics

Mark 10:35-45

10:35 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." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to 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?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to 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.

Sermon:

My daughters play this card game called "Mao." It's a little like Crazy Eights, where you try to get rid of your cards by matching either the suit or the number of the card in the middle. But there's one major difference. As a new player, you are not told all the rules at the beginning of the game. New players are surprised when they have to pick up extra cards because they neglected to name one of the Beatles after putting down a four - or when they didn't name one of the seven dwarves after matching a number card. It's very fun, unless you want to win, because it's hard to win the game when you don't know the rules.

I imagine that the disciples must have felt a little like new Mao players. James and John, for example, were originally fishermen. They knew the basic rules of that lifestyle: you cast nets, you catch fish, you sell fish, you make money. When Jesus came along, they left their nets to follow him, becoming fishers of people, and suddenly the rules changed.

But Jesus didn't tell them the rules for being disciples at the beginning. Now that he is making his way towards Jerusalem, and knowing that he will not be with them much longer, he is teaching them what it means to be his followers. He is giving them the rules, but they just don't get it. While Jesus is saying "It is in losing your life that you save it", they are arguing about who will be the greatest in the Kingdom. Just after Jesus tells them that the last will be first and the first will be last, we have today's reading, where James and John ask Jesus to grant that they will sit on his Right and Left side in his glory. Even though Jesus has told them where this journey will end, that it will end with the cross, they still think they are following Jesus to the throne. Their vision of Jesus as a King is what compels them ask for places on his right and left side. At the end of this journey, however, it is not the disciples who will be on his right and left, but rather two crucified bandits. Would James and John have made that same request had they truly understood where this path was leading?

You'd think by now that Jesus would have run out of patience with his followers. Have these disciples been listening at all? Yet when two of them urge Jesus to meet their request before even telling him what it is by saying "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you", Jesus does not berate or rebuke them. He remains gentle, and calm, and provides a

beautiful model for attentive listening and conflict resolution. First of all, he could listen without becoming angry. Because he so understood human nature, it did not at all surprise him that the disciples would jockey for position. Instead of giving in to them, however, Jesus turns this request around, and places the emphasis on humility, on the willingness to lead in service without flaunting authority. The repeated struggles for honor among the disciples show what a difficult task that reversal of values is. Andre Resner, professor of Homelitics, writes in “Feasting on the Word” that James and John “prove that they had not left all when they followed him. Some nets are harder to let go of than others. . . . Those surreptitious nets of desire for personal power and glory, of use and manipulation of those we know to get what we want – these are the nets the disciples had failed to let go of.”

This of course is a problem not only for the disciples back then, but also for us today. Even those who are very spiritual and very faithful sometimes get caught up in the desire for power without even realizing it. In his book, “Let your Life Speak”, Parker Palmer, a deeply spiritual and discerning member of the Quaker religion, gives an example from his own life of how this desire for prestige is so ingrained that often we do not even perceive it. He tells about how he had just been offered a new job as the president of a large and prominent educational institution. He was excited about the position, which would have provided not only more income, but also more influence and opportunity to serve. Even though he was leaning towards accepting this offer, he decided to call together a group of trusted friends to help him make a final decision. When they gathered, these friends asked him some questions about his vision for the school, and the other things, and then someone thought to ask, “Parker, what would you like about being president?” Immediately, Palmer started listing things that he thought he would not like – the fundraising piece, the political piece, not being able to teach. They asked again, “But what *would* you like?” His response was that he wouldn’t like to give up his summer vacations. And so they asked a third time, and finally from deep within, he answered with the only honest answer he could find, saying, “I guess what I’d really like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word ‘president’ under it.” And then the group was silent for a few minutes, until finally someone asked, “Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?” It had become clear – to all of them – that this was not the right job for him. And yet, without this careful reflection, it is very possible he would have taken this position of service without even realizing that the motivation was not really the love for the work he would be doing, or love for the people he would be serving, but love for the honor and prestige he would be getting.

This quest for power and status takes place in many arenas. We see it in companies, in schools, in churches, in government. Our newspapers are filled with stories of those in public service who no longer serve their constituents. We read about politicians who perhaps had once run for office with the true intent of serving the public good. Yet when they are elected and begin to gain power, they lose sight of this motivation. They work only to hang on to the authority, the honor and the prestige, and then let their power lead to corruption. They become solely self-serving rather than other-serving. It can happen anywhere people become motivated by their quest for self importance and power.

It is often hard to look honestly at our motivation for what we do, yet that is the heart of the matter. If we seek to serve only for the honor it brings us, we become like the person in an Anthony DeMello story. He bought a piece of art for one million dollars and then went home and framed and hung the cancelled check. He did not love the art work, only the prestige it brought him.

Jesus calls for our actions to be motivated by love of others. When we become self-centered, seeking honor and prestige in the service that we do, it is not only detrimental to our call as disciples, it is also divisive to the community. When James and John made their request known to Jesus, not only did it show a lack of understanding of the meaning of discipleship, but it also caused jealousy and division among the followers. This argument over who was the greatest among them had been going on throughout the journey.

In order to bring peace back into the group, Jesus asks the disciples whether they can share in his baptism and in the drinking of the cup. By doing this, he is emphasizing the equality among them. They all share one baptism, and they will all share in the cup of suffering that Jesus must endure. In this community Jesus tries to teach them that all are equal. Each person has a different gift to give in service for others, but all these gifts are equally important.

This theme of equality within the community of disciples fits in well with Jesus' teaching about the spirit and humility of a child, which has also been shared with the disciples along this journey. Disciples are not called to think of themselves as superior to others. Rather, they are called to become like little children who are humble and trusting. They are not called to play by the rules of the world when it comes to superiority based on wealth, education, or position. Rather, they are called to have the humility of children and be servants of Christ and one another. The way followers of Jesus exercise authority over others is through service to them. Before his death, Jesus demonstrated this by washing the feet of his disciples. He gave his whole life in service to others. This is how he transformed the world, and his work continues. Because his story did not end with his crucifixion, but with resurrection, his spirit continues to move among his followers even today.

We follow his example of service. It is how we are called to transform the world today. In her book "Bread of Angels", Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "This much is for sure, whether we can make sense of it or not, serving is how we will transform the world, not from the top down but from the bottom up. The ultimate trickle-up effect." That's the power God gives us in abundance, "the strongest stuff in the world: the power to serve."

Perhaps this is why what we do here on Sunday morning is called a worship *service*. Ultimately, these Sunday mornings should open our hearts and lead us to serve each other and those in the world. We come here together to worship a God who shows how to lead, not by demanding to be served, but by serving.

2000 years ago, God was given to us in the person of Jesus. Today, as followers of Jesus, we, in turn, give ourselves to God. We ask God to remold us so that we might live not by the world's standards, but by Christ's. We ask that we may be motivated by our love for God and each other as we serve others, rather than by our desire for honor and status. May we follow the light of Christ's teaching, the radiance of his example as we commit to becoming God's willing and humble servants, opening ourselves to God's transforming love so that we in turn can transform the world. Amen.