

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 29
October 18, 2009

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A mother was making pancakes for her two hungry sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. As the first pancake reached a golden brown, the boys began to argue over who would get it. The mother, seeing a teaching moment, said, “If Jesus were here, he would say, ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’” Kevin promptly turned to his younger brother and said, “Ryan, you be Jesus.”

Our Gospel story last week told of a rich young man asking Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. This man was not a disciple of Jesus’, but someone who was searching for something he thought to be lacking in his life. What Jesus told him was something that he didn’t want to hear.

Today, we hear the disciples James and John also asking Jesus for something. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Now, I find this to be a rather bold statement by these two disciples. Certainly, this is no small request.

So Jesus asks for clarification. What is it exactly that you want? James and John said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

Now, historically speaking, the church has usually painted a pretty favorable picture of the twelve original disciples of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, except for Judas, all of them were later considered to be saints. Both James and John have many churches named after them to this day.

However, there's no doubt about it, that on this day, James and John are not winning any brownie points. After all, their request contradicts all that Jesus had said and done in their presence. It was a totally selfish request. How naïve they sound.

But this is a desire we ought to understand very well. Everything around us tempts us to think of ourselves selfishly – as better than others. We like the limelight, even if we don't admit it. We like to sit in first class when we fly. We enjoy being served first, ahead of others at restaurants. We feel good when we get that extra special treatment above the rest.

We name drop to try and get that promotion on the job or that position on the team. “Well, I'm good friends with so and so”, or “My father had a senior position with this firm before he retired,” or “we often socialize with the family that is a major funder of this organization,” or “my daughter is good friends with the head coach's daughter.”

As an American traveling outside the country, we like the respect that is sometimes given us. If we say, “I'm an American,” we expect to get the nicer room, better service, or an extra chocolate mint on our pillow. We act with pride as we proclaim that we come from the greatest nation on the planet.

In Chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples; “The Son of man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Then the disciples, who did not understand what Jesus was talking about, began to argue amongst themselves as to who was the greatest.

Now in Chapter 10 Jesus took the twelve aside again and told them what was to happen to him; “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.

Then, the very next verse, we have James and John asking if they can have the seats of honor in heaven. We can imagine Jesus thinking; “What part of this are you not getting?” Now when the other 10 disciples heard this, they were furious. They were upset, not because they thought it was the wrong thing to ask of Jesus, but because James and John asked for it first.

When my sister and I were kids, we both liked to sit in a certain chair in the living room. It was the only rocking chair in the house, and we were both avid rockers. So as soon as we would arrive home, we would both dash for the chair. The one who got there first would boast about how they outsmarted the other. The loser would run to mom and dad and say; “It’s not fair, I called it first.”

This is the first thing that came to my mind after reading this story. The other disciples were angry with James and John because they called it first.

They appear as children who play “King of the Hill.” They shamelessly try to scramble to the top of the heap. We hear them beg for power, fame, and fortune, and we shake our heads in disbelief. Perhaps it shocks us to see such blatant self-promotion within the ranks of Jesus’ disciples.

Of course, outside the church, these attitudes are present every day. The world out there encourages us to take the initiative, climb the ladder, and push to the front of the line. “Blessed are the aggressive,” says our culture, “for they will get what they want.”

If that means pulling the boss aside and making a private pitch, then that is what must be done. If that means going to your teacher in school and asking for some special treatment regarding an assignment that was due, then that is what must be done.

Like it or not, this is how the world works. “Think of yourself first.” “Get what you can out of it.” “Look out for number one.” These are the gospels of our culture.

Here in the church, it disturbs us to see some of these same attitudes, even if they may not be immediately obvious. For there are some who seem to have an ulterior motive that will somehow benefit themselves. Yes, we, too, sometimes try to use God for personal gain.

I remember a few years ago a movie that came out that was called; “A River Runs Through It”. Maybe some of you saw the movie. It was about a pastor and his two sons who lived in Montana and did a lot of fly fishing. The scenery was spectacular.

Well, within two months after the release of that movie, the ELCA Bishop of Montana started receiving phone calls. He received calls from over 200 Lutheran pastors from all over the country claiming that the Lord is calling them to do ministry in Montana. You see, none of us are any better than James and John. We too look out for our own interests first.

Little did these pastors know that two-thirds of the state of Montana, where most of the Lutheran churches are, is some of the most barren, desolate land in all of North America.

What I am trying to get across is that every one of us can get confused about who Jesus really is and what it means to be his follower. Jesus’ response to James and John’s request was; “You do not know what you are asking.” Indeed, they did not have a clue.

So where does that leave us? How can these words have any meaning for us today? Well, in order to gain a better understanding, we must first finish the story.

You see, something happened to James and John – something that would change their lives forever. At some point they were transformed from gutless, selfish followers, who were only concerned about themselves, into faithful, dedicated servants who would eventually give their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

For James was the first of the twelve to suffer martyrdom, and the only one of the twelve whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament. One of the early Church Fathers wrote that it was King Herod Agrippa who arrested James around 43 A.D.

The guard who brought James to the court was so deeply affected by his witness that he became a believer on the spot. The guard then went with James to be beheaded with him, after having first received forgiveness from him. James' brother John, was also executed for his faith some time later.

After all, it appears that in the end James and John were NOT so concerned about where they would sit in the Kingdom. Rather they were concerned with proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. They were killed for being a servant of Christ.

So what was it that made such a difference in their life? What was it that changed them from self-centered disciples into self-giving martyrs?

It was the cross; the cross. After seeing Jesus mocked and beaten and hung up to die, they finally understood what it meant to serve. Before that time they were confused. They could not comprehend a Messiah that would freely give his life.

But after seeing his total submission; his ultimate sacrifice, they then knew what it meant to be a servant. They understood what Jesus meant when he said; "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 as a ransom for many."

You see, the death and resurrection of Jesus transformed the lives of James and John. It also transforms the lives of people today. For we are the "people of the cross"; the ones called like James and John to live a life of servanthood.

We understand what it means because we too have witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus. We hear it in the reading of the Word; we taste it in the bread and the wine; we feel it in the waters of Baptism; we see it in the lives of the faithful.

A monk once found a precious stone lying along the pathway. He picked it up and put it in his satchel. One day he met a traveler.

As the monk opened his bag to share his provisions with the traveler, the traveler saw the expensive jewel. He asked the monk if he could have it. The monk obliged and gave him the jewel. The traveler went on his way, overjoyed with the unexpected gift of this precious stone.

However, a few days later, the traveler came back in search of the monk. He finally found him and gave him back the stone. He said to the monk; “Please give me that which enabled you to give me the stone.” “Please give me that which enabled you to give me the stone.”

You see, the traveler was correct. The ability to serve – to give, is greater than the ability to attain.

Today we begin our annual ministry education and response program which is called “Pony Express.” It is a time where we seek to understand all that God has done for us, and in turn, how we can respond in faith.

This is an exciting time in the life of our congregation. There are so many ways in which we seek to serve Christ, which includes serving others. We sponsor missionaries in Africa. We financially support Humble Area Assistance Ministries which provides food, clothing, and employment assistance for the poor in our community.

We provide sundries and personal care supplies for Family Time which ministers to women and children who have suffered abuse.

We support our synod and national church body that provides millions of dollars for causes such as world hunger, HIV/AIDS education and treatment, disaster relief for natural disaster victims, clean water wells for rural villages, netting to prevent the spread of malaria.

A week ago we again hosted our annual Fall Festival that raised thousands of dollars for local charities. Last Sunday, myself and five of our middle school youth slept overnight in a box, and together with five other churches raised over \$5000 for the homeless in our community.

Tonight, we will welcome three homeless families into our church facility for a week. We will provide them with a hot meal, and a warm, safe place to sleep as they seek to get back on their feet again. I could go on and on. I can't begin to thank you for all what you have done. But there is still much to do. Many challenges lie before us.

What I am trying to say, is that it is your time, your talents, and your financial gifts that make ministry happen at Atascocita Lutheran Church. And my pledge to you is that I will always lead and encourage us to be a servant church – a church whose main purpose is to proclaim the Gospel through serving others. For that's what discipleship is all about.

Along with our ongoing ministries, I know that all of us are excited about our new worship home. You have all been extremely generous in your support. However, it can never be seen as self-serving. For then, like James and John, we will be arguing as to who gets to sit in which pew.

Rather it must be seen as a place to equip servants of Jesus. So that when we go back to our places of employment, to our schools, to our homes, we will do so as servants of the one who claims us, gathers us, and sends us for the sake of the world.

I invite you to join us in this journey, and support the mission that God has put before us. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

What does it mean to be FIRST?

For instance: What does it mean if you are first in line?

What does it mean if you are the first one to be done?

What does it mean if you are the first one to go when you are playing a game?

Do you ever say: "I want to go first"? Why?

Do you think that it is always a good thing to be first?

Sometimes it is fun to be first, but often it's not that important. In our Bible story today, two followers of Jesus named James and John wanted to be first in heaven. They wanted to sit next to Jesus – one on his right, and one on his left.

Why do you think that they wanted to do that? How do you feel when someone else is first and you're not?

Well, I have some good news for you today. Jesus says that it doesn't matter who is first. What matters is that he loves all of us just the same.

Do you know what else he said? He said that to be a follower of Jesus is not all about being first. Instead, it is about serving others. In other words, God wants us not only to think about ourselves, but to help others just like Jesus helps us.

Let us pray..... Thank you Lord for showing us what it means to be a servant. Help us always to be your servant, and to serve others. Amen.