

“Not so among you”

October 18, 2009

Text: Psalm 98:1-6, Mark 10:35-45

I.

In our reading this morning from Mark’s gospel, there’s a heaviness in the air. It’s been building up as Jesus moves, precipitously, towards Jerusalem. Which means, of course, that Palm Sunday is on the horizon, signaling Jesus’ final entrance into the holy city and his terrifying crucifixion a short time later.

The disciples can sense the tension. Three times Jesus has spoken to them about his death and resurrection. And the last time he mentioned it, he was talking about how, soon, they would be *going up to Jerusalem* and all this bad stuff was going to happen to him: he’d be condemned and mocked and flogged and killed ... and then, after three days, he would rise again.

That’s a lot of troubling information. What are they supposed to do with that? They’re feeling totally powerless and vulnerable.

It’s like when a friend or family member comes and unloads a whole list of frustrations and troubles on us. Easily, it can be overwhelming. Sometimes, it’s just too much information.

With all of this in mind, James and John come to Jesus wanting a special favor, some special consideration. With all the uncertainty surrounding them, we can’t blame them. Don’t we all like some special consideration now and then?

Later today, Yvette and I fly to London, probably an eight hour flight at least. Hey, I’d love to get upgraded to first class. Who wouldn’t?

A few times, in recent years, friends have given Yvette and me special tickets to the Sony Ericsson Tennis Tournament in Key Biscayne. Box seats, right up front; and they come with special parking tickets as well. You don’t have to ride the shuttle bus from the long-term parking area and stand in the lines getting to your seat way up top in the tennis stadium where you can’t see very well anyway.

Special consideration can feel pretty good to any of us.

II.

Moreover, with James and John—the brothers Zebedee—there was this lingering anxiety about the future. What did it all mean? This talk about Jesus being killed, but then rising

again in glory. Was this to be the Messianic Kingdom they'd heard about? Whatever it was, they wanted a front seat.

Jesus, they had said, grant us to sit, one at your right hand and the one at your left, in your glory.

Jesus' immediate reaction is something like, *Are you guys nuts? Do you have any idea what you're asking?*

Surely, on some level, Jesus has a sense of the dangers that are building up around him and of the possible suffering that lies ahead. And so he says to James and John:

1. *Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?*
2. *Or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*

Are you able?

It's from this simple question of Jesus that we owe the hymn we just sang:

*Are you able said the Master ... to be crucified with me;
Yes, the sturdy dreamers answered, To the death we follow thee.
Lord, we are able, our spirits are Thine. Remold them, make us like Thee divine.*
(and so forth)

Yes, we are able, they affirmed.

However, surely, Jesus senses on a deeper level that they don't get it? Again, how could they? Still, he grants one of their wishes, but not the other.

1. They can drink the cup that he will drink and be baptized with his baptism.
2. But it's not up to him to decide where people stand in the coming age.

III.

Later, when the other disciples learn what James and John had been up to, understandably, they become upset with them; although they, too, no doubt, had similar concerns. What did it all mean? And what was going to happen to them?

Moving on, Jesus begins to talk to them about power arrangements in the real world. He points out how the way of his followers is not the way of *lording in over people*. Rather, it's the *way of the servant*. It's the way of humility.

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.

The author of Mark's gospel uses this story of James and John, with all of its naïve assumptions and short-sighted understanding, to challenge us to a deeper faith.

It's compelling to note how the story starts out with a simple request for special considerations. And it concludes with Jesus taking them to his cross of suffering love. And in the process, their faith is stretched and deepened.

Can you drink the cup that I drink? Or be baptized with my baptism?

He knows they can't—not really; and neither can we. It's too much.

What this is about is discipleship. *What does it mean to be a Christian?* That's the overarching question. It's about discipleship.

- It's about a way of life.
- It's about a certain set of commitments and priorities.
- For sure, it's a leaning of the spirit ... toward *generosity ... kindness ... patience ... tolerance ... forgiveness* ... All these abiding values that are such blessings for the community of faith.

IV.

But then Jesus sits down and talks straight to them, from the heart; about what it means to be a disciple. He talk about the excesses of the world and about how, all the time, LOVE is compromised to **greed**, personal **ambition** and other **excesses of the spirit**.

And then he says to them, ***But it's not so among you.***

In other words, that may be the way of the world, but it's not our way. Then he talks to them about *servanthood*, and how whoever wishes to be great must be the servant of all.

Friends, Christianity is about a *particular way of life*.

1. There are always people who spend their lifetime thinking, no matter how much income they have, it's never enough. Greed and possession dominate their lives; ***but it's not so among you.***
2. In every community, there are folks mired in self-centered living. They just can't get beyond themselves. Always, in everything, it's got to be about them. They're just not interested in persons not in their group. ***But it's not so among you.***
3. All the time, there are those voices in our communities that are negative voices—always critical, always negative ... trying to bring people down ... never daring to look at the glass as *half full*. ***But it's not so among you.***

4. For some people, matters of justice and fairness are hollow concepts. It just doesn't bother them that some people are left out—unemployed, limited opportunity, no health care ... always fighting an uphill battle. ***But it's not so among you.***
5. Some people's lives are defined by fear. They're afraid of everything, certainly any change that might make things better. They never take any risks; never try anything new. ***But it's not so among you.***
6. There are always those who can't forget and forgive. They can't turn the other cheek and get on with their lives. For them, lingering anger and vengeance dominate their spirit. ***But it's not so among you.***
7. Many folks choose—everyday—to live in a small world. No aspirations or expectations; no curiosity or imagination. No vision of a better day. No hope that one day, love will rise up and a new day will be born. ***But it's not so among you.***

V.

Little by little, as Jesus' interaction with them unfolds, the disciples are *nudged* to a **new way of living**. And this **new way of living** doesn't have anything to do with status or pecking order or who gets to sit where. It's about serving ... serving one another, particularly those in need.

It's about giving and having a generous spirit and doing our fair share ... for it's when we give that we truly receive.

And it's about welcoming everyone ... and listening; listening to each other's stories about who we are—about our aspirations and hopes, our pain and heartbreak. It's about being patient and kind and merciful and forgiving ... again and again.

Friends, we're Christians ... and what Christians are about is ***a new way of living***. In that *way of living*, we all do our part, our fair share. In that *way of living*, LOVE is everywhere and defines everything we do. Love which *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things*. Love, which never ends.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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