

October 18, 2009

Mark 10:32-45

“Heavenly Seating Arrangements”

About one month ago, my adult son and grandson who had lived with us for seven years moved into their own home in Geneva. But I still see David every day. I help with getting him to school, from his after school daycare provider, to soccer etc. Each weekday morning he arrives before 7 a.m. and I give him breakfast and help him get organized for another day in the second grade.

Recently, as he was watching TV just before our departure, I brought him his shoes and told him he'd better put them on—it was time to leave.

His reply was sharp: “Grammy! I’m not your servant!!”

My inner voice also spoke sharply: “I’m not YOURS either, but I DID bring you your shoes, you ungrateful little twerp!”

Fortunately Christ died for our sins. Fortunately the Holy Spirit held my tongue. I managed to keep it together and pronounce: “TV-off. Shoes-on. Let’s go.”

As we left the house I found myself thinking, “Boy, he has a lot to learn about what it means to be a servant!”

Well----- today’s Gospel reading tells me he’s not alone!! We’ve been reading through this section of Mark over several Sundays. Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly life. He’s trying to help his disciples get a number of things straight. He wants to prepare them for what lies ahead. In the opening verses of our reading he says, “See, we’re going up to Jerusalem. I, the Son of Man, will be handed over to the priests and scribes—they’ll condemn me to death. Then they’ll take me to the Gentiles who will mock and whip and spit on me. They will kill me. Then, after three days, I will rise again.

And here we find the disciples’ third and most blatantly wrong-headed response to Jesus’ third and most graphic prediction of his death.

What do they say? How do they respond? Well, James and John, Scripture says, “come forward to him”. They approach Jesus to talk to him privately.

Do they ask questions about the horror he has described? Do they express their love for him—anguished to hear what lies ahead? Do they ask if they can help him somehow with this heavy burden?

No—it's almost as though they have selective hearing—having heard just a few words and phrases in Jesus' description of his death.

They heard Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man”. That was a title used for the long awaited “Messiah” who was foretold by the prophets and who would rule as God himself over his people. So, James and John got excited—Jesus is the Messiah!

They heard he would be entering Jerusalem. James and John got excited---- the Messiah would be entering Jerusalem!! Could this be the beginning of the kingdom that will have no end??

They heard Jesus say, “After three days I will rise again”. James and John got excited and then they became purposeful. “We'd better approach him right now! If the Messiah's reign is nearly upon us, let's see how we might position ourselves in that kingdom!!” They are concerned with getting a prestigious place near Jesus when he enters his glory.

So, what's this business about the seating arrangements???? Why do they want to be on either side of Jesus- one on the right and one on the left?

It was hard to me to relate to the issue of the seating until I remembered something. When I was in elementary school, we didn't know who would be our teacher until we showed up for the first day of school in any given year. So, there was all this anxiety about whether one would be in the same class with some good friends. Then, once we went into our classrooms, the next huge revelation came with the seating chart. Who would I be sitting with this year?? We all hoped and prayed again to be near a friend.

So—did James and John just want to be near Jesus, so they could be close to a dear friend? Well, the intensity of the feelings about this may correspond to the intensity of MY feelings about the seating chart in grade school, but the issues for James and John were different than mine.

Here are a couple possibilities. They see Jesus as the Messiah. So, they may be thinking of their faith's description of the messianic banquet—where we

will all feast one day in glory. Or, they could have been thinking about the judgment—where they might get to sit beside Jesus as he judges all creation. Maybe they could have some input—whisper in his ear their opinions about how the judging was going. Whatever the case—James and John want to sit beside Jesus in a specially chosen relationship.

I see Jesus shaking his head as he hears what they are saying. I see him shaking his head in disbelief. “You have no idea what you’re asking!!!” he says. Jesus is thinking about the suffering ahead of him, and he has to be amazed and even disgusted by James’ and John’s ignorance. He then speaks of what the road to glory requires. He talks of a “cup” and a “baptism”.

In Christ’s time, both the “cup” and “baptism” were linked in Hebrew thought to God’s judgment of human sin. The cup was filled with divine wrath. The prophets often used the image of the “cup” to predict God’s vengeance on leaders and people who opposed his ways of justice, obedience, faithfulness and mercy. For Jesus to drink from this cup was his gift to us--- his voluntary swallowing of God’s judgment for our sake.

The reference to baptism likely recalls the baptism practiced by John the Baptist—a baptism of “repentance”—of recognition of our sin, and a willingness to turn a new direction in the way we live. As a symbol of repentance, baptism is linked, like the cup, to sin and judgment. By his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus took upon himself the judgment humanity deserves.

James and John immediately tell Jesus they are willing to drink from that cup and be baptized by the same baptism. But they don’t get it.

Jesus knows they WILL suffer through acts of human sin—and tells them so, But they don’t get it. He explains that the heavenly seating arrangements aren’t up to him, but only up to God his Father. They still don’t get it.

The other disciples have picked up on this conversation and they are outraged. Jesus cuts into the turmoil saying, “It’s only in service that anyone becomes great. And the more lowly the service, the greater the stature of the disciple.” They don’t get it.

Friends, I’m pretty sure we don’t get it all the way, either. Instead of thinking thoughts lording it over my young grandson, about how little he

understands servanthood, I need to kneel at Jesus feet asking him to teach ME about servanthood.

The world even can teach us about servanthood, believe it or not. A room service waiter at a Marriott hotel learned that the sister of a guest had just died. The waiter, Charles, bought a sympathy card, had hotel staff members sign it, and gave it to the distraught guest with a piece of hot apple pie. “Mr. Marriott,” the guest later wrote to the president of Marriott Hotels. “I’ll never meet you. And I don’t need to meet you. Because I met Charles. I know what you stand for... I want to assure you that as long as I live, I will stay at your hotels. And I will tell my friends to stay at your hotels.”

Jesus calls all who would follow him to embrace a particular position—not in elevated seats of honor in his kingdom, but on our knees in service to others. We are called to sacrifice, to generous giving—of our compassion, our work, our time, our abilities, our goods and wealth. **AS WE DO THIS**, people will meet Jesus. And as we serve—wonder of wonders--- we give and receive love from God, and the bonds that weave us together become stronger and closer day by day.

This month we are thinking about **LIVING OUR MISSION: Loving God, Serving Others, and Growing Together**. None of these put us **ABOVE** anyone else, but all call us to be servants of Christ.

(Invite Chris Nelson to share testimony.)