

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 17, 2021 – 21 Pentecost
Mark 10:35-45 – To Sit by Jesus
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To better appreciate this morning's Gospel lesson, let me read you a portion of the three verses that immediately precede what we just heard: "[Jesus and his disciples] were on the road, going up to Jerusalem ... He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, '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'" (Mark 10:32-34).

According to Mark's account, this is the third time Jesus has explained to the apostles what will happen to him. The first time Peter rebuked Jesus for speaking as he did, and Jesus then rebuked Peter, saying "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:33). After the second prediction of his death, Mark reports that the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:32). They had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest, and Jesus taught them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

Now, for the third and last time, Jesus tells his closest followers that they are traveling with him on the road to Calvary. And what happens this time? The brothers James and John ask for a favor, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They want the "best seats." And the reaction of the other ten disciples is to be angry with James and John because they had the presumption to ask for this favor. We can imagine them all saying, "Why should they sit next to Jesus in glory? Who do they think they are? Don't we have as much right as they do to the best seats?"

It is difficult to absorb this radical teaching of Jesus: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." It is contrary to what we have learned in our society, to the values we are exposed to in our culture. As Jesus said, speaking of the Roman aristocratic political system of his day, "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" (Mark 10:42). We can translate this easily into modern times. People continue to strive for power and position, to grasp for more and more of the world's goods and services, to "kiss up and kick down," to bully the weak, and to forget the poor and broken and disadvantaged persons in our communities. We experience pressures from within ourselves and from our consumer culture to take what we want when we want it, placing our needs and desires ahead of others'.

Before we go on to consider the conversation between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee, I want to say a word about Jesus' direction to his followers to be servants and slaves. This is not license for some human beings to make others servants or slaves, to exploit others as if that were God's will for them. No, that's exactly what Jesus is challenging in this passage. We are not to "lord it over" others.

How can we understand Jesus' direction to his followers – to us – to be servants and slaves? The key is love. I am sure that every person here today has "served" others willingly from the wellspring of love. When you love someone who needs help, you naturally want to serve them, don't you? You don't think about whether the person you love has the "right" to be served. You don't think, "If I do this, what's in it for me?" Of course, you may not actually enjoy doing what needs to be done – the daily chores of caring for your child or an injured friend or a life partner suffering from dementia. But if someone were to ask you if you would rather "serve" the person you love or see them lack the help they need, you would without hesitation choose to serve.

This human experience of love gives me an idea of what Jesus is talking about. What if our hearts were so on fire with love for God and God's people that we would regularly and freely choose to serve others in need? Might this be one aspect of putting on the mind of Christ – or perhaps more accurately, the heart of Christ? Is this what we see in St. Francis tending lepers or Mother Theresa serving the dying poor in India – a glimpse of what it might mean to share in the love of Christ? Is Jesus' command to serve others really an invitation to love as he loves? As followers of Jesus we are all called to love God and our neighbors as ourselves.

When James and John asked Jesus for the privilege of sitting at his right hand and his left, 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?" In other words, are you able to be a martyr, as I will be? James was, in fact, one of the first Christian martyrs. And at the time Mark was writing this Gospel, joining the Christian community or participating in Christian worship meant risking torture and death.

I think we can understand the first disciples and how slow they were to take in what Jesus said about the suffering and death he would confront. Don't we all resist thinking about suffering and death if we can? I'm sure the disciples wanted their lives with Jesus the teacher and healer to go on and on. That was not to be. Jesus entered the human condition fully, from birth to death. So, he suffered as we all do. He also resisted suffering, as we all do. Think of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane to be spared the cross. When we suffer and when we face death, Jesus stands with us, holding us in compassion and with deep understanding. We are not alone. Jesus is with us. We may or may not feel his presence. But we can always call out to him, knowing that he knows what we suffer, for Jesus went on the full journey of life. We are not alone. Jesus is with us.

James and John wanted to skip the road to Calvary and go straight to glory. Jesus told them that isn't the way it goes – for him, for them, or for us. Much as we might desire that story, it isn't the human story. But the story doesn't end at Calvary. Each time Jesus explained to the apostles that he would suffer and be killed, he ended with these words, "and after three days he will rise again." The resurrection is the end of one story and the beginning of a whole new story. Jesus has gone before us to new life. As he said to the apostles before his death, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

Meanwhile, our own suffering and the suffering of those whom we accompany on the journey of life may help us to learn profound lessons about being human. Humility may replace inordinate self-assurance and independence. Certain "worldly" values may fall away. Our perspective on life may change. We may go deeper. Understand Jesus' teachings better. We may feel moved to relieve the suffering of others in compassion and for love of our Lord.

And when we come to Jesus with humility, knowing that we are not "the greatest," or worthy to sit at Christ's right hand or his left, then we may find ourselves seated next to Jesus after all. He is waiting for us to turn to him and find him. He is waiting in the lowly places, in the worst seats in the house, in the seats we'd like to avoid. Jesus is there when our hearts are burdened, when life is most difficult, when we know we cannot make it on our own. He waits and he calls us: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). The yoke of Christ is love, the love of God that will save us, make us whole, and give us peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.