

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 16, 2018

Series: We Are One

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Mark 9: 38-41

Mark 10: 35-45

The High Cost of Being First

Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first...must be slave of all. – Mark 10: 43-44



There was once a rice farmer who was working his field on a terrace atop a high mountain. Suddenly he felt the ground shake. An earthquake! He looked across the horizon to the distant ocean, and saw the water rapidly withdraw from the shoreline. He knew a tsunami was coming!

He saw his neighbors working the lower fields. They were too far away to hear him call. He had to act quickly; what could he do? Then it came to him. His rice barns on top of the hill were dry as tinder. He ran to the barns, took a torch and set fire to his barns. The fire gong began to ring. His neighbors, seeing the smoke, rushed up the hill to help him. That's where they were when the enormous tidal wave washed over the fields where they had just been standing.

In that moment everyone in the village knew – not only that their neighbor on the high hill had saved them, but exactly what it had cost him. They never forgot the sacrifice. Years later, when he died, they placed a monument in the center of town and a plaque that read:

“He gave us all he had, and gave it gladly.”

That poor farmer finished first but it cost him everything.

I read something this week that said that not many people would do that today. Most of us, said the author, are just too self-protective. People don't want to give; they only want to take. Service on behalf of others is out of style, the article said. People are too cynical, they won't give themselves away on behalf of others any more. You know, I disagree. I see a lot of costly sacrifice going on right here, every day. In fact, those who are not actively engaged in significant service ministry are a rarity here at Woods: from Sunday school teachers and tech folks to Habitat for Humanity volunteers -- people want to serve. Those who are not giving usually just don't know how.

The quote from Anne Frank on the cover of your bulletin is another one of my favorites, because it's true. The winners in the world, those who finish the race of life in first place, are like the rice

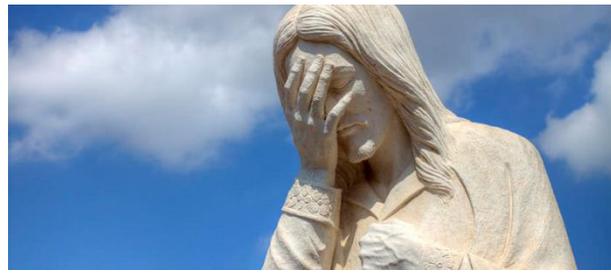
farmer; they give themselves away. And there are still plenty of winners. Anne Frank was one of the world's most famous, a tragic refugee and asylum seeker. She wrote:

"It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."ⁱ

Take James and John for example, the sons of Zebedee, called the "Sons of Thunder," two brothers who became part of Jesus' inner circle. It's easy to imagine how two young fishermen could have earned a nickname like "Sons of Thunder." In the passage that was read for us, one of the Dynamic Duo, John, runs rat-finking to Jesus about somebody trying to horn in on their success.

"Look Jesus," says John, "we're the starting lineup, and this guy from the minors is out there doing stuff in your name. He's "casting out demons." (Today we would probably call that healing.) "We tried to stop him, but...!"

Jesus would be like this photo, "How many times do I have to tell you?"



They had *just* been talking about this! A few hours earlier John and some of the others had been arguing on the road about who was the greatest. Jesus said:

"Now look. You wanna be great; you wanna be a winner? Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Is "Healing Guy" *servin* in my name? Then "Anyone who is not against us is for us!" It's probably the most ecumenical verse in the Bible. Since our theme for the year is unity, we need to listen carefully and be respectful of other faith traditions and give up what somebody called "our church envy." You know what church envy is? When you covet your neighbor's parking lot. (Actually our parking lot is fairly awesome.) It's "I wish my pastor was tall like the pastor over at XYZ church!" That's church envy.

A pastor was once asked about her church membership. She said, "We have eighteen hundred members." "How many of them are active members?" the questioner asked. "All of them," the pastor replied. "Half are working with me and half are working against me."

Not you! YOU would never do that. But here's the point: It really is either/or. Either you're working for Jesus or against him. It has to be one or the other. There's no such thing as a neutral stance when it comes to Jesus; there's no way to be just a little bit Christian. It's all or nothing with him.

Jesus makes that clear in the second reading for today. This is Mark 10: 35-45.

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 my baptism?” 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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

My son-in-law is a Cubs fan; he has been for decades, and Lord knows he has been patient. There have been some bleak years. Now my son-in-law is a good man, a Christian man, who has tasted victory. He wants this. Kind of like James and John, the Zebedee brothers, who go to Jesus with something they want. They want to be in first place.

They know Jesus is the Son of God; they love him with all their hearts. So they figure they are entitled. Notice that this is not a request; it’s not a question. It’s a demand. They say:

“Rabbi, we want you do *something* for us... Arrange it so that we will be given the highest place in heaven. We want to sit – one of us at your right, the other at your left.”ⁱⁱ “You don’t know what you are asking.” He tells them. It’s not that kind of kingdom.



He tells them the truth: “Guys, if you want to be close to me forever, you can be. Just do what I do, go where I go, love those I love. And understand: When you’re with me, you won’t be at the head of the table, you won’t be in the VIP box, you won’t be at the front of the parade.



There’s no point in arguing over who is the greatest, because whoever wants to be first must be last. “Whoever wants to be great among you must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first, must be the slave of all.”

It’s a paradox, and very hard to understand. And if you don’t quite get it, you’re not alone. Furthermore, I know how that sounds to me, and people like me. It sounds like Jesus is saying: “Woman, remember your place.” “Don’t get too full of

yourself.” “You are here to serve others, not to elevate yourself.” “Whoever wants to be great ... must be a servant.” I know how that sounds to me, but I can’t imagine how it sounds to people who have been oppressed, dominated or enslaved. I can’t imagine that they should be servants to other people.

I worried over that for weeks before I discovered a fine sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr. He preached it on February 4, 1968, two months to the day before he was assassinated. It’s called, “The Drum Major Instinct.”

King noted that it’s very easy for us to condemn James and John, to think of them as silly and selfish. But before we judge them we should look at ourselves. We’re just like they are. We have a drum major instinct, a desire to be up front, to be first. We want to lead the parade.

We pay a high price to be first. We take on mounds of debt so that we can appear to be affluent. We sometimes step on our friends and neglect God and our families in order to achieve, achieve, achieve – all because we want to be important; we want to surpass others, to gain distinction. We have the drum major instinct. We tell ourselves: I must be first...my nation must be first. ⁱⁱⁱ

Another very helpful insight came from Barbara Brown Taylor. She wrote:

“Jesus is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne; he is a servant, through and through. The good seats are not his to give. He does not even have one himself.... He is not in it for the reward. He is in it for the love of God who promises him nothing but the opportunity to give himself away.” ^{iv}

Folks, that is what it means to be first: to give ourselves away. That’s what glory is – a life of service. Jesus’ glory *is* hard to understand, but whether we can understand it, or not, we all know that it is service that will transform the world.

So what exactly does that look like? Let me give you one example.

For many months now 21 churches and other faith groups in our area have been working together to form a coalition of believing people now called ACT. It stands for Anne Arundel Connecting Together. ACT’s purpose is to help congregations act on their mission; in our case, to be a transforming presence in our community -- together, not in competition with one another, as so often happens, but united as one faith community. ACT is made up of many different kinds of faith groups: Methodists, Catholics, Muslims, Unitarians, Presbyterians, Quakers, black, white, brown people.

ACT is not an evangelical organization per se, but it’s worth noting that one of the major reasons unchurched people give when asked why they don’t belong to a faith community is that church people can’t get together. We aren’t united. Instead we divide up into all these little denominations and groups. ACT is just the opposite. ACT is a great example of Jesus’ call to unity: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” And we are for each other.

I have had a great time getting to know all these people; they are all different, and they are terrific. And don't you know that the worship is amazing when all of us come together to praise God! But I am not the Drum Major for ACT. I'm senior pastor of one of the most influential churches in our area; it would have been easy for me to take the reins and drive it, but that was not what ACT was intended to be.

Instead, ACT is a partnership, with...for...and by...people of varying beliefs and backgrounds, coming together to take action—to serve the needs of our community, in big areas, on intractable problems too large for even a church like Woods to tackle alone. Problems like mental health, addiction, neighborhood safety, affordable housing and more. I am very happy to invite you to the public launch on October 4 at First Community Christian Church in Annapolis. Next Sunday some of the ACT leadership from Woods will have information sessions after the 9:30 and 11 services. You'll get an invitation to the October 4 event in your email this week.

Woods Memorial Presbyterian is a great church. You know that. God has blessed us to be a blessing in service to this community. “To whom much is given much is also required.”^v

Jesus said:

“Whoever would be 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.”

Like the rice farmer, Jesus gave all that he had, and he gave it gladly. May it be so today. Amen.

ⁱ Anne Frank, July 15, 1944, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Anne_Frank

ⁱⁱ Mark 10:37 *The Message*

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. from a sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 4, 1968

^{iv} Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Crowley, 1997, 43-44

^v Luke 12:48