

Pentecost 21, 10.17.2021

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

“Being a Servant Church”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Jesus had a nickname for James and John, the sons of Zebedee. He called them the “sons of thunder.” Jesus gave James and John this very particular nickname in Mark, chapter 3, when he appointed the twelve disciples. Why would Jesus call them by this name? The nickname “sons of thunder” offers insight into who these two young men were.

So with that in mind, let’s back up to the beginning of Mark’s gospel, where we are told that Jesus saw James and John in their boat mending their nets. Mark’s gospel reads, “*Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him*” (Mk 1:19-20). Unlike Simon Peter and Andrew, who were called just before James and John, Mark tells us that James and John “*left their father in the boat with the hired men.*”

The first thing we notice about James and John is that their father and family were probably fairly successful at fishing. Their father not only had his two sons, but he also had “hired men” to help him. In other words, their father Zebedee could afford to hire employees, “hired hands,” to help his fishing enterprise. This, of course, suggests that Zebedee’s family and sons were perhaps, a bit more economically well-off. It’s hard to know, but there are other factors that can help us.

For example, we know that on one occasion James and John asked Jesus if they could rain fire down upon on a Samaritan village that had rejected them (Lk. 9:54). Jesus rebuked them, and a variant reading in Mark has Jesus saying, “*you do not know what Spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy lives but to save them*” (Lk. 9:56).

So as we begin to think about James and John, Jesus’ nickname “sons of thunder,” suggests that James and John were a bit cocky, brash, and even willing to kill those who rejected them. However, they did not yet understand that Jesus has come to save us, not to destroy us.

Yet, it is in today’s gospel reading that we see the fullness of James and John, and in a sense how full of themselves they really were. Their request to Jesus oozes a sense of privilege and entitlement. They clearly seem to have thought of themselves as better than the other disciples, and deserving of special treatment. Mark tells us that the other disciples became angry with James and John when they heard their request and Jesus’ response to them.

James and John had asked Jesus, “*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*” I

imagine Jesus sort of squinting his eyes and looking at them saying, “*What is it you want me to do for you?*” They said, ‘*Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.*’”

Wow! What a request. James and John haven’t really done anything yet as followers of Jesus, but they already appear to think that they are entitled to glory. Jesus called them out on their sense of privilege. Jesus said to them, “*You do not know what you are asking,*” because they clearly did not know what they were asking for.

They still had no idea about the way of the cross that Jesus had called them to. They had no idea of Jesus’ outpouring of all of his own privilege and power, his *kenosis*, as Paul writes. They did not yet understand that Jesus, the Word of God, laid down all privilege to become a suffering servant for all of humanity. In the words of Isaiah, “*He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*” James and John did not understand that true greatness and glory come only through giving up greatness and glory to become a suffering servant for others. Again in the words of Isaiah, “*he poured out himself unto death, was numbered with the transgressors, bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*”

James and John had left the boat, their father and the hired men, but they had not left their sense of privilege and entitlement behind when they followed Jesus. The call of Jesus is a call to follow him - and him alone. To follow Jesus, a disciple will have to abandon themselves over and over in order that they might discover the grace and blessings of servanthood with Jesus. This is the crucial part. Jesus called them to follow him, which means a disciple must walk and serve with Jesus in all things.

So Jesus asked them, “*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*” Their answer was, of course, predictable. They recklessly replied, “*We are able.*” Recall that even Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering from him, saying, “*Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.*” Jesus placed his will in the hands of the Father: “*Not my will but yours be done.*”

James and John could not yet say, “*Not my will but yours be done.*” There is, of course, grace in Jesus’ words to James and John. Jesus said to them, “*The cup that I drink you will drink; and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.*” What did Jesus mean by this?

A bit more about James and John might help us. Jesus’ words about the cup of suffering and

baptism applied to both brothers, but in different ways. Both James and John are remembered on the church calendar because they did suffer as servants of Jesus. James is commemorated on July 25 and John on December 27.

James was killed by the sword at the command of King Herod Agrippa as recorded in the Book of Acts (Acts 12:1-2). At his death, James became the first of the twelve Apostles to be martyred. So Jesus' words about drinking the cup of his suffering came quickly to James.

His brother John, however, appears to have lived a long life, dying naturally around the year 100 AD. Though we don't know much about James, early Christian tradition has attributed the authorship of the Gospel of John, the Johannine letters and the Book of Revelation to James' younger brother, John. Though John was exiled to the island of Patmos by emperor Domitian, where he wrote the Revelation, John was later allowed to return to Ephesus by Domitian's successor, emperor Nerva. John served the church in Ephesus, a church begun by Paul, and according to the Christian tradition, wrote the Gospel of John and his letters late in life.

One brother was killed by the sword, while the other lived by the pen proclaiming the Christian message. They both drank the cup of suffering, shared in Christ's baptism in the Spirit, and both became witnesses to Jesus by living for and suffering with him.

Jesus said, to them, *"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."* Jesus called James and John because Jesus knew that they would grow into servants of the church. Servanthood is about serving; it is not about glory or privilege. Following Jesus is about emptying ourselves of our own sense of privilege that makes us feel better and superior to others. I have suggested that James and John felt privileged because of economic class, but privilege comes in many forms, ethnic, gender, social and economic. Whenever we feel we are superior to others because of our skin color, our educational background, our place of employment, our gender or identity, we are do different than James and John grasping at glory without service to others.

We are a servant church. A servant church is about emptying ourselves of all privilege and pride to humbly serve others. Hebrews says that Jesus did not glorify himself when he became a high priest. Through faith, we have become a "priesthood of all believers." Each of us has a cup of suffering, a cross so to speak, that is a gift for serving others. We do not glorify anything except Jesus and his cross and resurrection. We are a servant church. One's life may be short or long, but true glory comes only through serving with Jesus in the world.

Being a servant church means allowing our baptisms into Jesus' death and resurrection to empower us daily in life. In a few moments we will come forward with open hands to receive in bread and wine, the body and the blood of Christ who suffered on the cross for all transgressors, including us. To be empowered by the sacraments allows us to live sacramentally each day.

Only through being nourished by the grace of word and sacrament will we also be able to say, "*not my will by your will be done.*" The world in which we live is filled with other messages, messages about self-glorification and about self-service rather than service to others. James and John offer us a blessing this morning. Through them, we are able to examine our own hearts and motivations. Are we serving Christ and our neighbor? Are we living for others and seeking to live as a blessing for others?

Christianity isn't just about intellectual belief; there needs to be a connection between the mind and the voice, the heart and the hands. Jesus offers us grace in word and sacrament, grace that makes us whole and connects our minds, hearts, voices and hands. True glory comes only in imitating Christ and in serving with Christ.

We are a servant church. The church exists because of the call of Jesus. The church has no special place in the world unless it serves the least of these. There are many opportunities for service at St. Mark's: music and worship, social ministry, the Soup Kitchen, youth and family. We are in our fall stewardship season, and stewardship is about using all of our resources for Christ's mission, as his body the church in the world. We may still be in a pandemic, but we are also planning an expanded music ministry to the Charlotte community, a new emphasis on family ministry, a renewed Global Ministry Team, and there is even talk of a Men's mission group to share in service to the world.

It is in serving that we become a blessing for others. It is in serving with Jesus that we share in his glory. We are a servant church. God bless each of your voices and hands as you seek to love and serve others here at St. Mark's. As we suffer and serve with Christ for others, may we also say, "*Not my will but yours be done.*" Amen.