

The Making of Servant Leaders

20 Pentecost B Oct 17, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Gospel: Mark 10:35-45

On the way to Jerusalem the disciples ask Jesus to grant them seats of honor. Jesus responds by announcing that he & his followers will “rule” through self-giving service.

³⁵James & John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus & said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶& Jesus said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷& they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand & one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; & with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but 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.” ⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James & John. ⁴²So Jesus called them & said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers are domineering, & their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴& whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son-of-Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life a ransom for many.”

Introduction

Today’s gospel starts with disciples obsessing over who will be closest to Jesus, leading to Jesus teaching his followers about God’s take on importance & power. Here Jesus makes it explicit that the reversal of values in God’s community is a direct challenge to the values of the dominant culture, where wielding power over others is what makes you great. When we pray “your kingdom come” we are praying for an end to tyranny & oppression. We pray this gathered around the cross, a sign of great shame transformed to be the sign of great honor & service.

Overview - Sharing in Your Glory: Success or Service?

Like James & John, we too are quick to assume that following Christ leads to success, power, & glory. Like James & John we ask for what we know & think we want—and we know that this world rewards success, power, & glory with even more of the same, &

we want it! Yet Jesus turns our lust for success, power, & glory on its head: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, & whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” This servant leadership that finds power in self-giving is to be a hallmark of Christian community. For this servant-leadership is both modeled on & empowered by the living Jesus himself. His greatness is exactly in his humility, his strength is in his weakness, & his whole life is given a ransom for our sake. Those who end up sitting at his right & left hand in his glory will not be the privileged & powerful, or even the disciples, who shrink back from sharing in his cup of suffering. Those at his right & left hand will be condemned criminals, crucified alongside him as he offers himself as a ransom for many. Likewise, those great among us will be servants, finding Christ’s strength in their weakness & giving of themselves fully, following their Lord through failure, weakness, & shame into true & eternal glory.

Theological Reflection

Luther’s dictum from *The Freedom of a Christian*—“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all”—well echoes the gospel this week. US culture puts a premium on confidence, enthusiasm, participation, & shared leadership. Hence, it is often very hard to let go of the idea that it is only “fair” for our voices to be heard & taken seriously. In today’s gospel, however, Jesus reminds us how at times we really do have to admit we have no idea what we’re talking about & must give full authority to another or others. Because James & John asking to “sit . . . at [Jesus’] right hand” shows not only a level of arrogance but even naiveté (10:37). Having Jesus in our life never gives us special powers & privileges & to be the “greatest” means to be “slave of all” (10:44), & to listen to those whom the world most despises & do what they ask with urgency & care.

Mark 10:35-45

For Mark, Jesus is hidden in his life of servanthood & in his death. However, when the Word is proclaimed in the assembly, Christ is revealed as messiah. This excerpt repeats the Markan emphasis on the reversal of the expected order, here especially concerning authority, just as the death of Jesus reverses the Jewish expectation of a savior. In the Old Testament, “drinking the cup” is an image used for both good & ill, & “to be baptized” is to be immersed in calamities. Here Mark, like Paul, ties the early church’s sacramental practice of communion & baptism to Jesus’ death. Who is on Jesus’ right & left (15:27) are the bandits on Golgotha. Mark’s is the earliest New Testament use of the image of salvation as ransom. The cup we share & the baptism

we undergo are signs of the death of Christ yet our confidence in the victory of Christ leads us away from domineering attitudes & into lives of service.

Images in the Readings

Both Paul & Mark, the two earliest writers of New Testament texts, describe Christ's crucifixion as a **baptism**. The Bible includes many narratives of people being swamped by water & so being washed clean of evil & renewed for life. For Christians, even death itself is like a baptism, a swimming away from sorrow & toward God. Repeatedly in Mark, & especially in John on the day before his death, Jesus is described as a **servant** who wills all his people to join him in a life of service. Perhaps always, but certainly in our culture, being a servant is not an attractive role. We don't even like the noun *servant*, & we are repelled by the word *slave*, but use instead terms like *the help*. In ancient throne rooms, monarchs were flanked on **the right & the left** by their most powerful assistants. In the New Testament, these positions are filled by the two bandits crucified with Jesus: thus, once again, a Christian reversal of the expected order.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

The seemingly impossible role of service is possible for us all because it is not just a commandment. It is a gift of God. Service is God's gift because it is God who serves us. Other gods have been revealed so that women & men could serve them. This God, the God of the Suffering Servant, the God of Jesus Christ, begins from the other end. God is, first of all, not a king sitting on a pyramid of the world creating pyramids of domination & subjugation in the hierarchies of church & society. Rather, the humanity of God is seen in that God chooses to be related to human beings through service. Jesus helps us to see the humanity of God so that we too can become representatives of new humanity. This is the image of God: freedom to serve others. [Letty Russell, in *Women & the Word: Sermons*, ed. Helen Gray Crotwell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 87-89.]
(Thanks to SundaysandSeasons.com)

Insights from the Text:

- I. Assumptions about Faith
- II. Blissful Ignorance even with the answers
- III. Reality that Comes

IV. Successful Servanthood

V. Revealing Rewards