

Job 38:1-7, (34-41)  
Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b  
Hebrews 5:1-10  
Mark 10:35-45

Sometimes we human beings are just plain comical!! It's probably not an accident that the characters we meet in the Bible are very much like us. Human nature does not change much over the millenia. We are still stumbling and bumbling around like the Keystone Kops, having done very little improvement over the last couple of thousand years despite all our best efforts. As we hear the stories of the people who were in Jesus' world, we realize that they're just like us! Or maybe it's "we're just like them!" As a species, we haven't improved much over these last two thousand years. Perhaps we've just gotten a little more sophisticated in our bad deeds.

At the center of today's gospel lesson are some truths about ourselves that we might have a little trouble owning as our own. The disciples seem to be a bit hard of hearing or perhaps just obtuse as Jesus speaks to them along the road to Jerusalem. For the third time, he explains to them what will happen to him when they get to Jerusalem. He doesn't mince words. He tells them straight out: He's going to be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death and then they will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him...and after three days he will rise again.

M.m.m.m.....that's a scenario that's hard to grasp.

And then the sons of Zebedee, James and John, pipe up with this demand: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And Jesus replies, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Now in the gospel according to John, Jesus says to his disciples in chapter 14 and chapter 15: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." That's a pretty sweeping promise! But there is a caveat in that sentence that we often miss. Jesus has a condition, so listen carefully. "If you abide in me and my words abide in you...." Just so we're clear. As long as what they ask is within the will of God and they are completely on the same page with Jesus, then their request will be granted. But that's a pretty big 'if.' No one is completely in lockstep with Jesus and no one is always within the will of God. So not all requests are answered as they are made! And most of us have found that out without really understanding why.

But here are James and John jockeying for position. They have a big ask of Jesus. Now bear in mind that they have just heard Jesus' prediction of what's going to happen when they reach

Jerusalem. Did James and John not hear him? Jesus was pretty clear and pretty specific. How is it that Jesus' description of what's going to happen to him doesn't register with them? Do they really want to be on his right hand and on his left? Were they not listening to Jesus explain what's about to happen? They want to be with Jesus when he comes into his glory. Do they realize that Jesus' glory is on the cross and the ones on his right hand and on his left hand are two thieves also dying a gruesome death? Is that really what they want? Or perhaps they're thinking back to the drawdropping experience on the top of Mt. Tabor when they watched with Peter as Jesus became positively luminescent and had a conference with the equally bedazzling Moses and Elijah. Perhaps they are imagining a regal Jesus who is about to step into his destiny by becoming the King of the Jews. And he will need a man on his left and on his right to help him govern. Maybe that's what James and John want! They want to be elevated to a place of honor. That's a very human desire!

Or perhaps, it's just a matter of wanting to be placed in special proximity to Jesus so that they can be reassured that they are both special and important. That's the part of the scenario that we can relate to. Each one of us wants to feel that we are important. We want to know that we are valued. We want people to look up to us or admire us or know that we are indeed special. Those seem to be human aspirations no matter who we are or in what millenia we are living. Each one of us wants to feel competent and important and revered. Striving for those acclamations goes on for many of us for an entire lifetime. We want other people to know that we are good at what we do. Being seated on either side of the most important person in the room is reassurance enough for James and John. They never heard the rest of what Jesus was telling all the disciples!

And they weren't alone in their aspirations to be singled out as special. All the rest of the disciples were fuming mad when they sized up the situation. Their attitude was, "Who do they think they are?" And we've probably all been on that side of the fence as well. Jesus asks James and John if they know what they're asking? Do they understand what they will have to do? Are you going to be able to drink from the cup I will drink from? "Oh, yes!" they say having no idea at all what Jesus means. And he wants to know if they can undergo the baptism that he will undergo? Again, "Oh, yes! We can!" they say and they don't have a clue what Jesus means. They will say anything they think will give them a place of honor with Jesus and among the other disciples. But Jesus defers to his own Father. It's not for him to say. Sitting on his right hand and on his left is for those for whom those places have been prepared.

Jesus goes on to tell them things they have heard many times before, but apparently don't quite understand. He tells them that if they want to be 'great' they have to be willing to be the servant of all...and not just a servant, but a slave. Their role in Jesus' life and in God's plan for all of us is that those who follow Jesus will take on the role of a slave, not the role of a ruler. Jesus can't emphasize enough that the power he's talking about is not the power that the earthly

rulers use to lord over people. The power that Jesus is talking about is the power of giving of self in service to others. Jesus is about to give up his life in service to others...all others...the disciples as well as us and all those who haven't yet come to know him. The kind of ruling that Jesus does is through the hearts and minds of those he touches. He does for them what James and John are trying to do for themselves....Jesus in his service and sacrifice for others....makes them feel important and special. He affirms their value in being willing to give up his human life so that all who follow him may go with him into eternal life.

Just like James and John, sometimes we get it backwards. Sometimes we seek the reassurance and the validation that Jesus has already offered us by doing things ourselves to make us feel accomplished and important and worthy. What we fail to remember sometimes in our striving for success and honor and accolades is that Jesus has already bestowed on us all the reassurance of our worth and value that we will ever need.

It's not the size of our bank account or the number of diplomas on our wall or our position in the company we work for or the size of our house or the number of Christmas cards we get...and from whom! Our worth is not measured in any of those things. Jesus has already shown us how important we are and how worthy we are but what he calls us to do for others. Just as Jesus had a mission, so do all of us who profess to be following him have a mission. It's not to sit on his right hand or his left hand. It is to be the servant...no, the slave...of all those that God has put in our life. It is in looking out for one another, forgiving one another, providing for one another, cherishing one another and being kind to one another that we prove our own worth in the eyes of God.

Jesus didn't die on the cross because we are sinful and awful creatures, despite what most of the atonement theories about the crucifixion have to say. Jesus died for us because he loves us and he wanted us to be with him and with God forever...so he crossed the boundary of death so that we could follow him into eternal life. And we follow him by becoming slaves to others and by laying down our life for them.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.