

Proper 24B
Mark 10: 35-45
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
October 17, 2015

Stretching ourselves towards Jesus

One of the joys of being a grandparent is that sense of *deja vu* as you witness your kids reenacting some of your own parenting moments. Our granddaughter Scout, like all two-year-olds, knows just how to ask her parents if she can hear one more story at night to delay bedtime, or perhaps have one more round of playing ball to put off a nap by a few more minutes. I get such a kick sharing these “parent moments” with my son and daughter-in-law, as I get to see Scout-in-action, adorably trying to shift things her way.

I get some of the same kind of feeling as I hear about James and John asking their not-so-subtle question of Jesus, trying to tee things up like children hoping to get something over on a parent, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” and then Jesus responding with that parent kind-of-answer, “You know, you really need to tell me what you want, before I can respond.”

Childish strategies. Misunderstanding of Jesus and his purpose. Even though Jesus has explained several times about what’s going to happen in Jerusalem, about why he is heading there, the disciples can’t let go of their own desires. They are still thinking that the trip, in spite of some apprehension, will end up in glory, providing his closest followers the unprecedented opportunity for privilege and greatness.

We see that same kind of naiveté as Jesus asks, “Can you drink from the cup I will drink?” James and John answer quickly, “We are able,” still imagining being seated at the banquet of the powerful, drinking from some spectacular chalice. They cannot yet perceive Jesus’ cup of suffering, his drink of servanthood, rather than privilege, favor, and standing.

It is just so normal to want to have power and authority. We have such ingrained ideas of honor and power, of strength and success. Haven’t we all, at one time or another, been faced with circumstances that led us to think, or even say out loud, that if only we had the authority, we could have made the right decisions, focused on the right things, taken the right next steps! If only we were in charge, all would have turned out so much better!

But Jesus takes a different view. For Jesus, what’s important is not waving around authority, but living life in humility; not worrying about who comes first, but living sacrificially. We see in Mark’s gospel that Jesus is infinitely patient, repeatedly reaching out and teaching, continually explaining what true greatness means. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant ...whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Renunciation of greatness. Clinging to the base of the ladder in order to serve, instead of scrambling as fast as we can to climb to the top. Is it any wonder why James, John, or any of disciples, couldn’t understand?

Jesus’ message is as fresh for us today as it was in the 1st century. It’s not a message of this world, not the usual rules of the game we’re taught on the playground of our day-to-day lives. In a mystical sense, we are hearing about overcoming our egos. We are hearing about dying to self, in order to find real freedom and wholeness by following our Redeeming Savior.

Jesus is teaching about transformation, the kind of transformation found by discovering that true leadership means living humbly in service to others, and stretching ourselves towards living sacrificially throughout our life journeys.

Several years ago I was in Honduras, attending a local Sunday worship service with my fellow missionaries. The priest was talking about what it means to serve and become a servant of all. She explained that we as Christians, should be willing to give freely from what we have, to share a meal, to share our clothing, to look out for each others' children, and offer hospitality to others. To serve God by serving our neighbor. Words that we've have heard since childhood. But after only a few minutes, I was squirming in my seat. And in looking around, so were my fellow missionaries. I couldn't have felt more uncomfortable. These people, this congregation, WERE the poor and yet they were asked to give from their abundance! In this place where people faced 70% unemployment, with many living at or below the poverty line, these people were reminded to help their neighbors, to serve one another, to live into a life that showed others what it means to follow Christ. It was profoundly humbling to hear this lesson in that Honduran context, and for me, I began to discover a new layer of meaning about what it means to live sacrificially.

We are all asked to stretch ourselves, to have our desires re-formed around a more fulfilling treasure, to see and hear new possibilities in how we are called to use our God-given gifts, to prayerfully discern how we can open ourselves to new ways to offer of our time, our talent, and our treasure. Yes, it's counter-cultural, but Jesus' way leads us to new life.

This time every year, we begin our annual stewardship season. I truly believe it is such a blessing to have this time, when our community can work together with prayerful intentionality, when we strive to hear how we are called to serve, and endeavor to see how we can stretch ourselves to give of our many blessing, to serve our Risen Lord.

Last week we had a ministry fair, showing ways we serve together as a community, both within and outside these walls. How might you be called to stretch your time and talent within a ministry at Holy Spirit? Are you being called to discover a way to serve, a new way to use your unique gifts and talents?

And as the Stewardship season continues, how might we all be called to stretch ourselves in terms of giving of our treasure, enabling this faith community to better serve our Savior and live into our discerned mission of building to serve?

Stretching isn't easy, for all change is hard. It is uncomfortable to try something new, to step out in faith, trusting in God. But it is through openness to change, where we find transformation and new life.

Jesus is with us, helping us to stretch, guiding us on the path to follow Him. We have his Word, his example, to teach us that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, humbly pouring out his life for us and for the world. We have his gift of the Eucharist, where we hear of Christ's great sacrificial love for us, his invitation to eat and drink, and to come to know deeply in our hearts his never-ending desire for us to be strengthened and nourished, enabling us to go forth from this place, to love, to serve, and care for our neighbors.

What could our lives look like, what could our community look like, if together we said, "Yes" to God, stretching towards lives of humble service, servant leadership, and sacrificial living? Imagine the possibilities, when we walk together, in Christ.