**“It Is Not So Among You”** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, October 17, 2021

**Psalm 89:46–52**

46 Howlong, O Lord? Will you hide yourself for ever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?

47 Remember how short my time is— for what vanity you have created all mortals!

48 Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol? *Selah*.

49 Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

50 Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted; how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples, 51 with which your enemies taunt, O Lord, with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.

52 Blessed be the Lord for ever. Amen.

**Mark 10:35–45**

35James 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.” 36And h e said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” 37And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and 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; and 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 and John. 42So 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. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and 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.”

Before getting to what I think is the main point of the gospel passage, I want to fill in some biographical details. As you know, Jesus and the apostles traveled together throughout Palestine for three or four years. When you spend that much time with a small group of people, you really get to know them all. We know Thomas had a questioning nature, Peter had an impetuous personality. James and John were nicknamed the “Sons of Thunder” by Jesus (Mark 3:17), probably because of their fiery, enthusiastic nature. Here they have the gall to ask to be Jesus’ right- and left-hand men in the kingdom. When he asks them if they are able to be baptized with the baptism he will undergo, I’m not sure they understand him to be referring to being killed. They gleefully and cluelessly say “we are able.” When Jesus says that they will be baptized with his baptism, he is foreseeing James’ death. James will be the first the apostles to be martyred. However John never was martyred. Mark, the author, writing in 70 a.d., has no clue that John is going to live to around the year 100, but he knows that James has already been martyred, he knows other apostles had been martyred, and he seems to assume the same will happen to John.

In any case, Jesus says that it is not up to him as to who sits on his right or left. The apostles are angry with James and John when they learn about this conversation. Jesus uses it as a teaching opportunity. You know that the Gentiles rule tyrannically, he says, but it will not be so among you. You must have a different standard of leadership. Whoever would be a leader must learn to be a servant of everybody else, just as I have come to serve others. Haven’t you noticed? It was the *kind* of leadership James and John were seeking—selfish, worldly leadership—that was the problem. “It is not so among you” (10:43), Jesus says. You are not to be bossy and exploitive. That’s not my style. And again, I have to say, haven’t the apostles noticed this by now? Why are they so slow to get on board? Well, they are human after all. Jesus was not looking for perfection but for potential when he chose his apostles.

I think sometimes we learn something, but then we backslide. We revert to our old ways, and we have to be admonished, we have to say “Gee, I knew that! I knew that! I’ve got to get back with the program.” They meant well, but they were men of their time and place, and often backslid to the common mentality.

The apostles’ entire time with Jesus was a learning experience. It was on-the-job training. Although we see them continually getting it wrong and needing to be corrected, I think they did learn a lot from Jesus, and probably from each other, as well. James and John probably learned their lesson after this incident.

We, too, are perennial apprentices needing constant guidance and correction. We learn by personal experience, and often by making mistakes. It helps if we have a merciful but no-nonsense teacher who can point us to the better way, although the key is not just obedience, but really internalizing the better way, so that it is the way that we actually desire. The biblical language for this is setting your heart on something (2 Chron 19:3; Ps 62:10; Prov 19:18).

As an adult, you are probably your own sternest critic. And you have your own standard for judging whether you’re doing well in your learning experience here in this life. You make a mental note to yourself when you think you should have said something different or handled something differently. I’m hoping that James and John, in their minds, said “note to self: don’t selfishly aspire to a position of power.” If they really understood Jesus, they might have said “God, please teach me to be a selfless servant of others, as the Master himself is. Help me to set my heart on serving others.” Maybe James would have become a shining example of doing this, if he had had a chance to live longer. John did live longer, and seems to have become a great example of love. His main message to his congregation, when he was approaching a hundred years of age, was “little children, you are from God . . . let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God . . . for God is love” (1 John 4:4, 7–8). Thank God for lessons learned. I am certain it brings God joy when we share God’s love with others, because then God’s love keeps growing as it circulates through God’s family.

I have another lesson for today. We are learning lessons here, too. I hope we all can set our hearts on the goal of supporting the work of this church. We practice love and fellowship amongst each other. We also offer various events to the public, like our upcoming fair. We offer Christian education, and I am still hoping to get more people to attend our Thursday morning Bible study. Let me know what you are interested in. We undertake ecumenical services with two nearby churches, although COVID has suspended those for the time being. Also suspended due to COVID are our Howard lectures, which touch on social themes. Eventually, this pandemic will pass. If you want to see the work of our church continue, then make a pledge for the coming year. If you can increase your last year’s pledge a little, that would help, too.

Giving is a spiritual practice, whether it is giving money or time or attention. Jesus gave time and attention to people who came to him. Paul says “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). Political candidates don’t care about your heart when you give. But God does. “God loves a cheerful giver.” Giving is good for us; it is a part of our spiritual practice, our spiritual service.