

Palm Sunday (B)
Pastor Ed Harkey

Mark 10:32-45
TLC, Keene, NH

You Can Be First¹

“[Jesus said:] whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

“O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” (Francis of Assisi)

Introduction

“There is no Pastor so humble that He doesn’t have a Pope inside him.”

Such was the admonishment of Norman Nagel, a Seminary professor I greatly admired. Saying what he said was his fatherly way to remind us future Pastors, that the Gospel should both be proclaimed *and* lived. I am grateful for his counsel.

Though, in reality, the problems of vanity, insistent ambition, and other vices abound not just in Pastors. Indeed, “these problems are as old as time and as current as the daily news.” (Thompson, *Feasting on the Word (B)*, 4:188)

But Jesus shows us a “*more excellent way*.” (1 Corinthians 12:31b)

Main Thought: That when we keep our eyes on that Savior, and dwell within the shadow of His Cross, we lose the self-serving self, and gain another, higher, better self. This higher, better self – cruciform in nature – seeks to serve the Savior by serving others. (Adapted from Thompson, 192)

YOU CAN BE FIRST ... IN THE RIGHT WAY

Amen.

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Jesus is on the doorstep. Having steadily made His way to Jerusalem, He has arrived. Our redemption is at hand.

32 [Wherein] taking the twelve again, he began (for a 3rd time!) to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying:

¹ In the Right Way

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock, spit on, flog and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

But as if not to hear Jesus (a recurring theme), the 12 are caught up in their own visions of grandeur.

35 And James and John, the sons of Zebedee (with mommy in tow, says Matthew²), came up to [Jesus] and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” 36 And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” 37 And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³

A bit presumptive, don’t you think?

Yes, Jesus would call those who follow Him to something higher than the self, but the disciples have nothing but self on their minds.

You know, I get that! Where, Eddie is a fine Christian husband, a good provider, and a fairly decent Pastor. “But once in a while (just ask his wife), [Eddie] shows his old Adam’s desire to rule over his wife – to demand, to dictate, to insist on his own way. Once in a while [Eddie] won’t forget the wrongs of others and instead wants vengeance. ... [Eddie] has a struggle, a war going on inside.” (Schiefelbein, (Schiefelbein, CPR, 1:4, 30

Sound like anyone you know? [No resemblance whatsoever 😊!] Where Jesus asks the question he asked us last week: *“What do you want me to do for you?”*

What James, John and the others want is prominence, power, and glory. They want victory, to be #1. They want an empty tomb without a cross.

Yes, what is it that we often seek “regarding greatness – success in business, power in the church, status before others, or a sincere desire to serve God to the best of your ability?” (Schiefelbein, 29)

Where pressed even further, we think we can do service without Jesus.

² 20:20-21

³ *Contra* God’s view of glory, “to lose everything so that others might gain, to live a real life that will make a real life possible for others, and to give only and never take ... except to take their condemnation upon himself.” (Eschelbach, CPR, 19:2, 21) Glory in God’s economy = a Cross.

38 Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup (that is, of suffering⁴) that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism (that is, of death⁵) with which I am baptized?” 39 And they said to him, “We are able.” And 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,⁶ 40 but 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.”

What Jesus asks of us *cannot* be done without Him – w/out dying, without blood.

*“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned ... Having gifts that differ according to the **grace given to us** ...”* (Romans 12:3, 7)

What has God graced and “*faithed*” you to do? And are you willing to do it?

Wherein, there will be times in our life of service as disciples when the cup we drink *will be* one of suffering, and the baptism with which we are baptized *will mean* a total denial of self. But by that other Baptism – the greater one – we are remade in His image. In that other Cup – the one of grace and forgiveness – we are fortified and strengthened to live out His forgiveness and grace.

*41 And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. 42 And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 43 But [the world’s idea of greatness] **shall not be so among you** (one who is watered, bodied and blooded by Jesus⁷). **But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.***

Yes, in God’s way of doing the math – of not giving us what we deserve, and then giving us what we don’t – this is how we come to greatness. Where, in the world, life is about *getting* ... (but) in God’s economy of grace life is about *giving*. Like Jesus gave, and still gives ... and serves. So that if we *want* to be great, then we, too, will serve. (Adapted from Maxwell, *CJ*, 35:1, 82)

⁴ Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 49:12; Lamentations 4:21; Psalm 75:8; Mark 14:36

⁵ Romans 6:1-11; Colossians 2:11-15

⁶ Indeed, as Jesus’ chosen vessels, and once filled with the Holy Spirit, they will, James at the point of Herod’s sword (Acts 12:1-2), and John exiled “because of the word of God and testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9).

⁷ Lenski

There's nothing wrong in wanting to be first. There is nothing wrong in wanting to do your best – to be great at what you do with the time, talents and treasures God has gifted you. If you want your living *not* to be in vain – all the better. To quote Martin Luther King, don't give up the "drum-major instinct." Don't give up the need to be first. Only be first in the right things, and in the right way. Be first in love. Be first in sacrifice. Be first in forgiveness. Be first in generosity. Be first in compassion. Be first in joy. Be first in service. Be first in faith!

45 For (that is, on the basis of all that will soon transpire during this week we call "Holy") ***even the Son of Man*** (the "Ancient of Days,"⁸ the great I AM) ***came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***"

Incredible! That the Lord of all Creation, our Redeemer, would stoop so low as to touch lepers (like us) ... to wash our dirty feet ... to pollute His own flesh with our sin. Where, He has done this – *for you, for me*. Beaten beyond recognition, crucified, died and buried, He demonstrated exactly how much He truly loves!

How much more those – like us – whom He has brought to Himself. Nothing too dirty, low or mean. Rescued from sin, death and hell, what kind of response is worthy of that? Baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, and now partakers of the cup of blessing, what's next for the daughters and sons of God?⁹

Perhaps this:

- ✚ Before your feet hit the floor each morning, ask God to direct you to where you might be of service. Then, each evening when you lift those "*beautiful feet*" (Isaiah 52:7) off the floor, give thanks for the opportunities He gave you to offer yet one more "*cup of cold water in His name.*" (Matthew 10:42)
- ✚ More specifically this week, pray the Lord to put on your heart a friend, neighbor or community need. Ask God what His invitation to you *might* be concerning your generosity and their situation. Then, "*go and do likewise.*" Give someone your tunic; in a tangible way, show them God's mercy. (Luke 3:11; 10:37)
- ✚ Or, simply take a friend or loved one to coffee (you buy). Ask them to give you their take on what your serving strengths are. Then, prayerfully plan a way of using one of those strengths to benefit others in the coming days or weeks.

⁸ Daniel 7:13-14; John 8:58

⁹ The following is adapted from "The Discipline of Generosity," Diana Bennett, *Silencio*, December 2014

Of course, keeping in mind that this text, or God's giftedness to us is not really about us. It never really was. Wherein, any act of service, as it flows *from* the Cross, always points back to the Cross, and what the Savior accomplishes for us there ... what He has accomplished for all!

Conclusion

Martin Luther once said: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, but also is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (LW 31:344)

In this scenario, "we become free through faith in Christ who sustains us until we take our place in his kingdom. This faith clings to Christ's promises, honors him with obedience, and motivates our service." (Schiefelbein, 31)

Even as the prayer of Francis of Assisi becomes our own:

"O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

BE FIRST ... IN THE RIGHT WAY

The Way that was paved *by*, and forever leads back *to* ... Christ.

Amen.

[Friday E-mail:] The story is told of a man who booked passage on a stagecoach that listed three classes of passengers: 1st/2nd/3rd class. But when he looked into the coach, he saw that all the passengers were just sitting together, without any distinction. It wasn't until the stage coach came to the first of several steep hills did the difference between the classes become obvious. Where, at each hill, the coach driver stopped the coach and said, "All 1st class passengers, remain seated. 2nd class, please get out and walk. 3rd class, please kindly get out and push."

Such a story, in part, captures the essence of the body of Christ – the Church, where often the same three classes of members can be found. There are those who just sit, those who simply walk alongside of the body, and then, there are those who do the bulk of the ministry. To which Jesus says in our Gospel reading for this coming Palm Sunday, that the greatest is the one who serves!

Such is the spiritual practice we have been reflecting on this week, culminating in the greatest act of service that this planet has ever witnessed. Wherein, our own service is often imperfect – rooted in pride, glory and the need for reward. We see such a view in James and John, as they approach Jesus in **Mark 10:35-45** with a presumptive request. That request is then met with a life-altering response. One that speaks to the true nature of servanthood, of the life of the disciple – to use the metaphor of the opening story – perpetually riding in 3rd Class! Wherein, lest that offend you, we need look no further than to Jesus – the "Son of Man ... the Ancient of Days" – who says, this *"Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."*

Friends in Christ, Jesus is not simply leaving us with an example to follow. No, by becoming the servant of that which He created and redeemed – becoming your servant and mine – He comes to atone for all of past sins of commission and omission regarding our own failed service. Then, He paves the way to a new and better life. That when we keep our hearts on Jesus' way of service, "we lose the self-serving self and gain another, higher, better self. This higher, better self answers the call of Jesus Christ to be a disciple by serving others."

So let us rejoice to take the stagecoach "ride" of Holy Week together, benefiting from His undying service to us at Calvary's cross. But then, seeking to love and serve Him, by loving and serving others in His name. No one said the spiritual practices were easy. They certainly weren't for Jesus either. SYOS