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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 22, 2015

Text: Mark 10:35–45

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the skills that parents try to teach their children is discretion; that ability to judge a situation and take the appropriate course of action so as to not to cause unnecessary offense. One wonders if James and John somehow missed that lesson. I'd like you to listen to the verses just prior to today's gospel reading and see if James and John exercised good discretion. Jesus said, "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. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise" (10:33–34).

And then begins today's gospel reading, "And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you'" (vs. 35). Curious timing indeed! I going to suffer, be flogged, die and – catch this – rise again from the dead after three days. And you're first recorded response is a personal request?! No concern, no empathy...no discretion and no real understanding as to Jesus' ministry.

It gets worse when we learn what they want, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (vs. 37). We aren't told what motivated James and John but it seems obvious that they are two ambitious men seeking glory, greatness, and exaltation. To sit on the right and the left of the king was to be the king's closest advisors. These were the highest positions of power and influence.

Jesus is talking suffering, death, and resurrection. James and John are thinking power, ambition, securing the highest possible places of honor in Christ's kingdom. Their ambition has blinded them to what Jesus is saying and doing.

That's our Lord conclusion, according to vs. 38, "You do not know what you are asking." But Jesus is about to teach us. And more than ever, we need open ears to hear and ready hearts to receive. The Lord asks James and John a question, "Are you able

to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (vs. 38). Jesus is referring to the cross of Calvary. That's the way to true greatness: betrayal, suffering, death by crucifixion, and resurrection.

What is set before us today is the contrast between how God defines glory and honor and how man sees glory and honor. They don't usually coincide.

Well, the other 10 disciples are infected with the same disease of worldly ambition and glory. Verse 41 states that they became indignant at James and John. Why? Mark doesn't really say but Jesus directs His teaching to all of them indicating that they all need to hear what He's got to say. In all likelihood, they were upset with James and John because they wanted the same things but the sons of Zebedee beat them to the punch.

Listen to Jesus, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (vs. 42–45). I don't think Jesus could have made the contrast between the way He rules His kingdom and the way man rules his kingdom any plainer. The means and methods are diametrically opposed to each other.

Jesus began with how things work in world kingdoms. Great ones, from a human point of view, are those who rule over people and use raw authority and power to get things done. It's just how the world works; it's taken for granted.

We see this use of power and influence in government with politicians trying to accomplish whatever policy or program they deem fit. It's present in families. Parents exercising control over children or vice versa. And yes we even see it in the Church of God – wherever power is exercised – at the synodical level, at the district level, and in local congregations among pastors, staff members, congregational members, church boards, Voters' Assemblies, wherever. Rulers, of various kinds, do what the word says...they rule over others by exercising authority over others. This use of power and authority isn't evil or wrong in itself. It's just the way the world works. Can you imagine a situation or human institution where this isn't the way things work?

Well, actually there is one. Jesus says, “But it shall not be so among you” (vs. 43). God’s kingdom is set up differently. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (vs. 43–44).

Greatness in God’s eyes is service, loving slavery to the neighbor’s need. Honor and glory means not to be master and ruler of all but the servant and slave of all. Greatness in God’s kingdom is the dignity of servanthood. The great one, at least great in God’s eyes, looks to the needs and desires of others before his own. “How is my neighbor served?” becomes the order of the day. The great one in God’s kingdom sets aside his or her wishes for the good of everyone else. The great one works with different principles from the world: love, truth, service, dignity, beauty, sacrifice, compassion.

See how different things work in God’s kingdom? Now, lest we dismiss Jesus’ teaching as being at best impractical or at worst, idealistic, and lest we conclude that that’s how it will work in heaven but not now, we must hear Jesus again verse 45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus, true God and true man, not only says that this is how it’s to be among us, His people, it’s how it is with Him. Jesus’ whole life is characterized by love, truth, service, dignity, beauty, sacrifice, and compassion shared with all He meets. And where does Jesus exemplify this most perfectly and fully? Remember that cup and baptism that Jesus mentioned to James and John? You got it, Jesus’ crucifixion. There He gives His “life as a ransom for many.” Jesus on the cross winning the world’s salvation and victory is the height and perfection of greatness, honor, and glory.

Jesus’ greatness is found in His loving service, in His stooping down even to the point of death on a cross. There wasn’t anything that was beneath Him. He touched the untouchables, He loved the unlovable, He ate with the social outcasts. Jesus took the dregs of our depravity and consumed them in His bitter cup. The filth of human sin was cleansed in the washing of His baptism on Calvary’s hill. This was the greatness that Jesus lived; this is the greatness to which we are called.

But that was Jesus. We can’t possibly live like that! Well, let the Scriptures once again be our guide. Think of the blessed Virgin Mary. She gave up her wedding plans, her name and reputation, her entire life, to give birth to God’s Son. Think of the apostle Paul. He was on the fast track to being the greatest Pharisee of all times. But he abandoned it all to serve the Jesus whom He once tried to destroy.

Think of men and women who give up personal ambition, careers, promotions, and monetary success so that they can be dads and moms. Or adult children who care for their elderly parents. These and a million other such examples are where true greatness is found. And you want to know the great kicker in all this? They don't even realize it. They are being servants to all, living in the life, love and grace of Jesus who served them perfectly, beautifully, nobly on the cross.

This greatness of servanthood is not something we stir up in ourselves. This isn't some kind of self-help through self-sacrifice. It's God's work. This is the life of Christ lived in us and through us. Jesus was baptized into our death so that we might be baptized into His death and immersed in His life. Jesus drank the cup of suffering so that we might drink the cup of blessing, His blood poured out for us, for our forgiveness and life.

Some may undoubtedly say, "I can't live this kind of selfless life." Well, that's true; you can't. You must die and rise again in Christ. It's our Lord who works this in and through you by the power of His Spirit. For Jesus is the one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life up as a ransom for many. Jesus does this in us and through us.

Do you really think the New Testament is exaggerating when it says we have died with Christ so that we might walk in His resurrection life (Romans 6, Galatians 2) or that we are new creation in Christ Jesus (II Corinthians 5) or that we are being conformed to the image of Jesus (Colossians 4, Romans 8)? Jesus is working His greatness in our lives through the power of His gospel. That work will not be completed until the resurrection of the Last Day. Trust in Jesus to do His saving and transformative work. In loving Jesus, you learn to love your neighbor. In loving your neighbor, you learn to love Jesus. Trust in Jesus. He gave His life so that all would be accomplished. Trust in Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.