

Mark 10.35-45

October 21, 2018 – The Twenty-Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

service is the path of joy

Roy W. Howard

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will face great suffering and sorrow confronting the religious and political leaders of the day. His disciples are still with him – they haven't left yet. The subject is a familiar one: what it means to follow Jesus' way. They – and we – have been over it many times. Still it remains elusive. Having been reminded again of the personal suffering that this way of life will entail, James and John, in a singular display of non-listening, respond by asking Jesus for personal favors. Let us sit at the head table: left and right, how convenient. Really? Really. Was Jesus' heartbroken at this moment, or merely frustrated, as any teacher is when his students simply don't get it? In any event, he launches again into a description of the way of life he disciples are to follow.

We know - because Jesus tells us - that this way of life will involve personal sacrifice and likely suffering. That of course, means it is not easy to be a follower of Jesus – it never has been and never will be. Yet, James and John say with ultimate foolishness: "We are able!"

In all honesty, aren't we all like James and John, preferring the best seats in the house, or at least the most comfortable; whenever possible fleeing the costly risks of discipleship. It's important to acknowledge this at the outset because it forces us to confess how often we fail to live as Christians, particularly when being a Christian requires actual practice, and not just god talk. So confessing our failure is the first step toward freedom and faithful practice. Why? Because, those who acknowledge their failure to get it right are in the best position to rely upon God's power to sustain them, precisely in our weakness.

To follow Jesus Christ in a life of personal sacrifice is only possible by submitting our whole self to God, asking God the Holy Spirit to work within us what is impossible in our own strength. Such a community of faith, that relies upon God's Spirit and not merely our own innate capacities, will be capable of nurturing its members to be Jesus' followers.

It is not enough to assume that being a member of a Church is sufficient to be a disciple of Jesus. You know the old saying: standing in a barn does not make you a horse, any more than sitting in sanctuary makes you a Christian. The forces of cultural accommodation are too great for us to assume that we will learn the way of Jesus, without practicing the steps. This way of life – depending daily upon God – is one that has to be cultivated and practiced in the habits of our mind, heart and deeds.

If James and John, who walked so closely with Jesus, are inclined to deny his way in the pursuit of their own agendas, that should be a clue for us. As someone put it, "we too have the DNA of the Sons of Zebedee." They understand greatness as reaching the highest rung on the ladder. What else could it be?

I love what my friend said :

When was the last time you heard a prayer in worship that said something like: "God, take away our status and our power, make us the least and the last." And what might happen if we printed mission statements like this on our bulletins: "First Presbyterian Church: Striving to be last." We are "first" church of wherever, after all. How about "**Least** Presbyterian Church"?

Ha, ha, ha!

What then does it mean to be great?

In Jesus' way, greatness means finding a way to invest in others' lives, to give and to serve so that others are lifted up. It's the relationship that matters most. In the economy of Jesus when others' flourish, you flourish, too. This is why relationships are the heart of Christian discipleship. Amazing enough, it's also the way of deepest happiness. That's why when you give generously so that others flourish you actually have a sense of joy. One way to begin is imagining yourself in the life of another. If I were her or him, how would I see the world? What would I need to flourish and discover God's love? Get inside the story of another, rather your story alone.

The sons of Zebedee remind us of the folly of choosing our own natural agendas over the path to joy in service. Jesus says, you gain life by investing in the lives of others so that they may be free for service to God. Emptying ourselves, we find ourselves. Giving to others always comes back to you, perhaps not in the same form sometimes pressed down and pouring out hundredfold.

Yesterday, I read about David Simpson and his wife, Kathy Fletcher, have dedicated their lives to helping young people escape dire situations and transition into adulthood. It started by helping a teenage friend of her son. That's all: a simple act caring that led to deeper relationship and a community of care.

Still, we often miss what Jesus is showing us or willfully ignore it. Yet, scripture tells us that Jesus' is our high priest. He entered fully into our condition, experiencing fully our weakness, knowing intimately our suffering. He knows our ignorance and our folly. As our great high priest he prays for us and through his cross, he delivers us from ultimate slavery to our sin.

While we have the DNA of the Zebedees, that makes us prone to hubris and folly, God is merciful and loving. God has given us a path toward joy in Jesus, our great high priest. We might miss all this if we assume Jesus knows nothing of our weaknesses and our proclivity to fail. In fact, Jesus knows it all – and he loves us into the fullness of life.

In relationship with Jesus – bound to him by his suffering love for us – we can be in relationship with others bound by love for them. This does not come naturally for us, yet as we walk in the way of Jesus, we learn the way of the cross, we learn to be servants of love.

My friend suggested asking a different question. Instead of asking Jesus how we can get to the top, ask the Lord: how can I serve my neighbor?

See what happiness flows forth!

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