

SECOND READING: Mark 10:35-45

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<sup>5</sup>James 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." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup>But 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?" <sup>39</sup>They 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; <sup>40</sup>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."

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So 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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

*Let the words of my mouth be spoken only by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may be led to think upon your truth, for the sake of Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

FIRST READING: Philippians 2:1-11

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If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was <sup>6</sup>in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

### ***“The Servant Leader”***

It has not been very many years since Mike and I were advising our kids in how to fill out those college applications. “Make sure to list your leadership experience,” we told them. We knew that in these modern times, the presence of leadership skills is weighed very heavily. *Rev Sam Wells, Dean of Duke University Chapel, humorously imagines an application of an entering student in HIS university, “While still in the womb I spearheaded the movement for my twin and me to enter the birth canal.” “While still in nursery I organized the toddlers to campaign for recyclable diapers.” “While in 1<sup>st</sup> grade I represented my class at the school board meeting, petitioning the move to 2% milk at snack time.” “When I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade I went on a Girl Scout expedition to the planet Jupiter, and devised a system by which children could share oxygen to save baggage weight on the return home.” “When I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade I scythed deep into the Amazon jungles and discovered an unknown tribe, learned their language and helped them find a sustainable water supply.”<sup>1</sup>*

A bit of an exaggeration, but it IS true that leadership skills are valued quite highly in our society, yet, not always do we feel the same about leaders. We’ve been burned by leaders who have let their egos corrupt them, who’ve become deceptive, manipulative, self-serving, oppressive. They may not have started out that way. They may have been simply ambitious, determined, aspiring people, eager to throw themselves into what they were passionate about. That’s the kind of people, I think, Jesus saw James and John to mostly be, when they asked him if he’d do for them whatever they asked him to do. They were primarily devoted followers, wrapped up in the one they’d come to love.<sup>2</sup> *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* Jesus probably recognized their wink at the perks and public acclaim that they thought would be theirs by being Jesus’ leading executives, but I think he also saw that they were “loaded full with faith in him”.<sup>3</sup> They knew he was on the train bound to rule in glory and they wanted him to save them a seat.

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<sup>1</sup>Sam Wells. “*But it Shall Not be so with you*” <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2009/091018.pdf> (accessed 10/19/18).

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Adams. “*When You Want It All*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2003?101903.html>. (accessed 10/19/18)

<sup>3</sup> JoAnna Adams.

But regardless, Jesus told them they were missing the point....still...they were missing the point. Three times already on the disciples' walk with him to Jerusalem, if you recall, he'd explained that while he would indeed "come into his own," it would be necessary for him to be first condemned to death, mocked, flogged and killed. "*You don't know what you are asking me,*" Jesus said. "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism that I will be baptized with?*" He was speaking not of baptism by water, but of the death he was about to face. And the cup...it was a cup brimming with selfless love he was talking about. *Can you drink it? Can you do it? Are you able to give yourselves away?* "*Of course, we are able,*" they said, once again missing the point.

Jesus continued, "*Look guys...If you want to be close to me, if you want to rule, you will have to do what I have done already, and you will have to undergo the suffering and death that I am about to undergo. In my kingdom, whoever wishes to become great must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be a slave of all.*" Ahhh.. to be a great, to be like Jesus, is to be a servant. To be one who influences or leads people in his way, as all of his disciples by definition need do, is to be a slave.

It's important to consider this word, "slave". It may seem objectionable, even jarring because we think not only of the horrors of slavery in the South when we hear it but of contemporary crimes like human trafficking and sexual exploitation. However, Jesus was not using the word in this context. He was describing himself, and by extension his followers, as ones who "*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in **humility** regard others as better than themselves,*" who have no ambition or goal beyond seeing others flourish, who want nothing but to empty themselves, to give themselves away."<sup>4</sup> This slavery is an end in itself. It is a freely chosen position, a way of saying, "*I have no goal in life beyond bringing out the best in others.*" It is not about becoming wealthy or being powerful or having a platform for acclaim or flaunting a title. Joanna Adams says that "*You have caught at least the corner of this mystery if you find yourselves living in a world that is turned upside down, if you find*

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *Bread of Angels* (New York: Crowley Press; 1997), 43.

*yourselves not saying “God, let me tell you what I want you to do for me,” but “Lord, tell me what I can do for you.”*<sup>5</sup>

Now, even if we “catch a corner of this mystery”, it is not easy to keep hold of it. It’s no easier for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> c than for the disciples in the 1<sup>st</sup> , no easier for us to maintain an attitude of servant leadership than they. It is counter-cultural in our time too. Our egos easily lure us into thinking that in order to be important, to be loved, to be somebody, we have to one-up someone else. We think we have to prove ourselves or show off in order that we can command the spotlight and get the attention that we deserve. We are taught that it is not wise to release control once we have it or be bothered with the needs of others when ours are so important. Look out for #1, right? Our identities and self-worth become bound up in our positions, and we get angry, throw temper tantrums, bully, or manipulate when those identities are threatened. when we are not able to lord our positions over someone else.

*I love the story Methodist minister, Rev. Ginger Gaines Cirelli, tells on herself. Evidently, her husband had had to come home from work with a bad cold. This meant that their dinner plans with friends needed to be cancelled and all the household duties like walking the dog and cooking and now caring for him were on Ginger. “I got mad,” she says, “afterall I, I am the Sr. Pastor of a church and I’d been struggling with writing a difficult sermon all day long....one on humble service!” She admits that she had fallen into an all about me pit.*<sup>6</sup>

Her example reminds us that this challenge to be a servant leader involves all places of our lives...school, home, our neighborhood, work, church. *One of my seminary classmates, an associate pastor at a church in a well-to-do neighborhood in Austin, shared with me that people who were living in \$ million homes around the Church (even church members) had begun to scream about their property values going down when her church started serving the homeless.*

Yes, the Gospel challenge involves all area of our lives and it is difficult one. But, brothers and sisters, Jesus does not call us to an easy life. He calls us to a free life. He calls us to a life

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<sup>5</sup> Joanna Adams

<sup>6</sup> Ginger Gaines Cirelli. “Power Trip” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6zdYjmvsSk> (accessed 10/19/18).

free to give ourselves away, free to bring out the best in others, free to find joy in seeing others flourish. He calls us to a life free to choose to suffer on his behalf and free to be enslaved...(and there's the irony) ...free to be enslaved to love of others above self.

*Mark & Katy worked routinely at the night shelter/soup kitchen that North Decatur Presbyterian Church ran in downtown Atlanta. Mike and I worked there at least once but Mark and Katy never quit serving there from the time it opened even though it had become greatly more difficult since the birth of their two children. One night they were working and a man named Randy came in. He had a bad case of chronic pneumonia. Randy was everything you would think of when you think of an underdog. He was sick, alcohol-addicted, a homeless African American man in the South. Escaping his real poverty was a pipe-dream. Mark and Katy were worried about him. They thought he might die. They couldn't think of what else to do except to invite him to their house to stay in their guest bedroom until he got well. He did get well-physically and spiritually. When I last heard about him, he was 19 years sober and had been going back every one of those years to celebrate Christmas and Easter with.... Mark and Katy...servant leaders for sure.<sup>7</sup>*

Friends, Jesus chose to not be a leader who would lord his power over others, who would relish the acclaim, silence those who threatened him, control those who did not follow him. He chose instead to surrender his power, to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable and the powerless. He freely chose the way of suffering and death in order that all people could see and be EMpowered to be leaders too...in order that all people could work together for good, speaking where voices have been silenced, welcoming the lonely and feeding the hungry, helping the sick and easing the fears of the afraid. Jesus asked James and John long ago, “*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*” Brothers and sisters, “Are we?”

Amen

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<sup>7</sup> JoAnna Adams