

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24
Year B

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

As I mentioned last week, this tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel focuses on three questions related to three very important topics for people - sex, money, and power. Two weeks ago, the reading was about divorce and the common cause of that - adultery. Last week, we looked at the problem of wealthy people trying to gain eternal life. This week, we turn to the third issue - power.

As happens so frequently, the creators of the lectionary have skipped an important, though short, section of this chapter. In the verses immediately prior to today's reading, Jesus predicts His passion for the third time, being more specific than before about what will await Him in Jerusalem. This is vital in our understanding of how the disciples miss the meaning of all Jesus has told them.

At the beginning of today's reading, James and John, the sons of Zebedee and two of the inner group along with Peter, approach Jesus with a request. Perhaps they understood the delicacy of their question as they prefaced it with the plea for Jesus to grant them whatever they ask. In asking their question, James and John are asking for power and prestige. They are looking toward a future without hearing what Jesus has just told them - that He was going to Jerusalem to die. Perhaps it is fitting that, during the crucifixion, two thieves occupied the places on Jesus' right and left, rather than the disciples attaining the seats on His right and left in glory.

When the other disciples heard what the sons of Zebedee had requested, they complained that they also should be included in the handing out of honors. It was not just the two who had missed the point Jesus was trying to make; all were caught in the same trap. Their holy zeal was accompanied by ambition, according to John Calvin. Few are the leaders who cast aside vanity and ambition, no matter what field they are in. The disciples were no exception. Jesus acknowledges this common human desire as He cautions the disciples not to follow the example of the Gentiles, but to follow His own example. We are not to be striving for the power and prestige of position, but to be imitating Jesus' show of servanthood.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus showing how a servant-leader behaves. At the Last Supper, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, including Judas'. In His stories, Jesus pointed out how the first would be last and the last first - another example of servant-leadership.

What does this look like in this day and age? According to the Greenleaf Institute which has produced many books on this topic, a servant-leader is one who sets the agenda for the organization and then facilitates the work of the people in their efforts to fulfill that agenda. The leader takes a supporting role to make sure everyone has the resources needed to be successful,

while staying in the background. The successes of the workers are celebrated, not the ideas and accomplishments of the leader.

Jesus consistently urged His followers to seek the supporting roles, to guide others in their search for salvation, and not to look for any credit for themselves. This was a hard message to receive as it was contrary to what everyone observed in their daily lives. But, to be successful in God's eyes, we need to view our ministries from God's perspective. Jesus ends this reading with the reminder that He came not to be served, but to serve, and give His life for many.

As we gather the pledge cards and offerings to support the Marion Medical Missions, we are not looking to see who gives the most or who is active in every ministry of St. Matt's. We are seeking to serve the people of Christian County and the world through our efforts and the resources God has given us. Our prayer is for God to send us out to do the work God has given us, to love all whom we meet and to share that love with everyone. We do not ask God to make us the largest or wealthiest church in town, but to allow us to serve all. That was Jesus' message to the disciples then as it is for us today.