

**“Not So with You”**

*Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you (Mark 10:42-43).*

In this season of political posturing, it’s almost embarrassing at times to watch would-be Presidential candidates as they jump through all kinds of hoops to get noticed. Week in and week out, from one primary to the next we find our politicians pandering to the crowds. They wear t-shirts and hats from local sports teams, they join hands with local officials and well-known businessmen, they even speak with obviously forced and awkward accents to illustrate their special connection to state of the day and, it seems, nothing is beneath them when it comes to getting a vote. The political process in the United States constantly provides us with interesting examples of persuasion, but so often, what is touted as public service actually looks a lot closer to self-service and prideful promotion.

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin wrote that, “There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I would probably be proud of my humility.”

Pride is a scary thing. It keeps us turned in on ourselves, it prevents us from reaching out to others and, if we’re honest, it is a constant companion in our lives. Pride colors our view of the world, it drives us to look after our own interests, and, in today’s Gospel reading from Mark, we find Jesus confronting the problem of pride in two of His dearest disciples.

James and John were especially close to Jesus. Along with Peter, they formed an inner circle within the Twelve; in fact, in chapter nine of Mark, these three disciples were witnesses to the Transfiguration in which Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in glory as He prepared for His final journey to Jerusalem. It was clear that Jesus had a special relationship with James and John. Yet, in their pride and paranoia they approached Jesus, with an arrogant and ignorant request, “Teacher...we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

What an introduction! Not only do these brothers have the audacity to approach Jesus with their egocentric question, but they preface it with a statement that only furthers their self-serving agenda. And I love Jesus’ answer, “What do you want me to do for you?”

You see, in the first few verses of today’s reading, Jesus had told them exactly what He would be doing for them. Jesus said, “We are going up to Jerusalem...and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him” (Mark 10:32-34). Clearly and without any ambiguity Jesus told them that in a matter of weeks He would be betrayed, mocked, beaten and executed, and this is the response He received, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask.” Their self-centered question is ridiculous and completely misses the point and yet Jesus plays along, “What do you want me to do for you?” And James and John jump right in.

Showing just how little they understood about Jesus’ mission, the brothers ask, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37). There it was! After three years of following Jesus; after hearing Him teach and preach; after watching the blind receive sight, the deaf hear and the dead rise; after Jesus had specifically told them what was about to happen in Jerusalem; these egotistical and unaware brothers are trying to secure a position of privilege and power. They want to make sure that they have a place of honor with Jesus as, in their flawed thinking, He established an earthly kingdom. Their minds were set on a worldly definition of glory, one that was based on earthly authority, *and Jesus’ death was nowhere in their thinking.*

In a response that foreshadows Jesus’ words from the cross, He basically tells them they have no idea what they are talking about. “You don’t know what you are asking” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” When John and James answer that they can, Jesus must have responded in a tone that matched the conceit of their question, because the other disciples started to pick up on the gist of their conversation with Jesus, and, Mark tells us that when the other, “ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.” If you ever want to see the morale of an organization fall off a cliff, whether it’s in a classroom, an athletic team or a company, the perception of preferential treatment will cause instant division. The jealousy of the other ten disciples is

understandable, and as tempers began to rise among the group, Mark tells us that, “Jesus called them together” to address the issue face to face.

Rather than letting the pot simmer and the harmony of the group continue to erode, Jesus seized this as an opportunity to teach an important lesson about the Kingdom. And He began by drawing on their disdain of their common Roman enemy, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.” This was something they all understood. This was the way of the world. Those with power used it. Those with strength, showed it. After all, what good was authority, unless it could be leveraged? The disciples saw this everyday in their culture so colored by Roman occupation and they were disgusted by it in the same way we are disgusted when we hear about corporate or governmental abuses of power.

But then, Jesus took an unexpected turn. “Not so with you.” In these four words, Jesus makes the bold assertion that life in the Kingdom of God is different, and the disciple of Christ doesn’t imitate the way of the world. The follower of Christ does not manipulate circumstances or abuse power for selfish gain. The child of God is different from the world.

“Not so with you.” These words stopped the disciples in their tracks and, today, these words should challenge us as well, because in these words of Jesus we are confronted with the truth that we have not lived lives that reflect the Kingdom of God. We have taken advantage of others. We have sought after preferential treatment. We have approached life with an air of privilege and in our sinful pride we routinely justify our failure to do the right thing. We are no different than the arrogant brothers in today’s reading, and we are no more forgiving than other ten disciples who took delight in their vengeful indignation.

In this reading Jesus unmasks the self-righteous, self-promoting way of the world, and He redefines what greatness really means. “Whoever wants to become great” Jesus says, “must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all.” In these words, Jesus paints a picture of a new reality; a reality that is based on humility; a reality that is found in service and self-sacrifice; a reality that is impossible for sinful man to understand; and, as He spoke these words, it was a reality that Jesus was about to create through the cross.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” In the Greek text, the word that Jesus uses for “serve” can communicate a variety of meanings. It can mean to simply serve up a meal like we might find in the action of a waiter or waitress, but it can also mean to supply the things necessary for life, and as Jesus closes out this section of Scripture, He removes any doubt as to how this life-giving, life-sustaining service will be offered. “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” This is where true greatness is seen!

As Jesus points to the ransom that He is about to pay for sinful humanity, He is echoing the Word of God we find in today’s reading from Jeremiah that, “The time is coming...when I will make a new covenant...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:31, 34). And this new definition of greatness wasn’t lost on the author of Hebrews who wrote, “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free” (Hebrews 9:15).

In the cross of Jesus Christ, we are served and we are saved. We are rescued from ourselves, we are delivered from our broken promises and freed from our sinful pride and, in His forgiveness, *our hearts are changed!* Through Christ’s service to us we are given the call and the power to be different from the world; to operate in a new reality, to live as disciples of Christ and children of God; not to be served, but to serve. The cross changes everything, and whether it is something as simple as helping our spouse with a household chore, or something as challenging as swallowing our pride and setting aside our power when we have every worldly right to “lord it over someone,” the cross has changed us forever.

We are people for whom greatness has been redefined, and through whom the love of God can be shared. To be great, is to serve. That’s what Christ has done for you, and that’s what He will do *through* you in the lives of others.

*Lord, help us walk Your servant way wherever love may lead  
And, bending low, forgetting self, each serve the other’s need (LSB, 857:4).*

Amen.

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