

## “Not So Among You”

Mark 10:35-45

*“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”* Mark 10:43-44

A few years ago a seminary professor from Duke Divinity School wrote an article for *The Christian Century* in which he described some of the students he had encountered at the seminary. The article was entitled, *Sons of Entitlement*. “They are usually -- but not always -- young and white in addition to being male. They have typically grown up in the church, attended Christian colleges and majored in religion. They like to refer to their mental index of Theologians Worth Reading and readily scoff at those theologians they have not read (and so are not worth reading). They patronize second-career students, female students, minority students and those ministerial students who are without apparent academic ambitions. Their fathers are frequently pastors. It is possible, these Sons of Entitlement piously concede in candid moments, that God may be calling them to become professors or bishops.”

He goes on to say that they “talk a lot -- preventing others from speaking -- and pose questions that are more like efforts at entrapment than genuine attempts to learn. (‘Teacher, since you said X before, how can Y also be true? Are you sure you know what you are talking about? I read a book once that said...something else.’)

These students bristle at structure and deadlines (such things are for lesser students); regular attendance (they have more pressing obligations); and real, rather than inflated, grades (they received straight As in college, so why should they be getting Es now?). Not too long ago, a student asked me during a final exam if he could write an essay on a topic of his own choosing rather than on one of the three possibilities provided by the test. When I explained that such latitude would be unfair to everyone else in the course, he replied softly, “No one else has to know.” On another occasion he expressed interest in becoming a bishop. I bet he makes it.”<sup>1</sup>

We might wonder about such students who have grown up in the church and who are now in seminary, presumably preparing for some sort of religiously oriented service, presumably Christian in nature. How can someone get that far on a path toward Christian service and have such an attitude? How can they have missed so completely what Jesus was all about? But if we do happen to wonder about such things, consider two men, disciples of Jesus, James and John. You have heard of them before. They are well known.

And you have probably heard of this incident as well, if you have been in church very much. This text is a familiar one. In Mark it comes immediately after Jesus has predicted his imminent suffering and death for the third time. After his first prediction, Peter rebukes him and tells him that can never happen. After the second prediction the disciples get into an argument over which of them is the greatest. And here, after the third time that Jesus tells his disciples what is ahead for him, James and John come forward to ask for a special favor, to be given special positions in his coming kingdom: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” When the other disciples hear what James and John are asking for, they become irate.

And that is when Jesus explains how it is: “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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:42-45

What Jesus is doing is calling them to the service of a higher cause. He is telling them that it is time to put aside personal glory for the greater good of others.

Anyone who reads this section of Mark will be tempted to marvel at the obtuseness, thick-headedness and dull-wittedness of the disciples. What's the matter with these people, we want to know. Here is Jesus telling them that he is going to have to suffer and die and all they can do is argue about who is the greatest? All they can think about is what is in it for them?

And if that is our reaction, then Mark has done his job well. For what this Gospel writer is really up to in showing how badly the disciples missed the point, is confronting his readers with whether they are getting the point or not. Do we get it? That is the question. Do we get that it's really not about whether we get an honored position, get to be thought of highly, or get whatever else it is that we want, but that it is really about serving others?

We all come to church for a variety of reasons, many of them related to our own personal needs. Maybe we have a need to be connected with other people. Maybe we sense a spiritual need that is at least partially filled by our coming. And those are legitimate needs. And part of the church's mission and ministry is in helping to meet those individual needs. But if that is all that we do as a church, then we have failed. Because there is another step involved. And that is to move beyond our own needs and to think of the needs of others.

Churches today engage in marketing strategies. What is it that people want? How do we attract people? How do we provide what they are looking for? Which is appropriate, for a church should be there to meet the needs of people. But there also comes a time when the church must do something else. The church must remind people that it doesn't end there. The church must also remind all of us that we also have a higher calling. There are expectations of us that we will sacrifice some of our own interests in the interests of something higher and greater.

You know how it is in the world, Jesus says. You know how it works. You know that people look out for themselves. You know that when someone has an opportunity to make a killing, that person would be considered a fool if he or she didn't go for it. The examples of that kind of thinking and behavior are, unfortunately, so numerous and obvious, that everyone is able to think immediately of several examples.

One of the most egregious examples that comes to mind is the outrageous compensation packages going to C.E.O.'s these days, even C.E.O.'s of companies that have not done well. In 1965, the average American chief executive officer was paid about twenty-four times as much as the average worker. In 2007 the multiple was two-hundred and seventy five.<sup>2</sup> As Nell Minow, the co-founder of an independent research firm says, Americans aren't necessarily opposed to gargantuan pay packages; after all, somebody, someday, might decide to over pay *them*. "But injustice is another matter...."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says, that is not how it is among you. We operate on a different system here, he says. In this organization, if you want to be great you must be a servant. If you want to be first you must be a slave of everyone else. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The church has failed if all it ever does is take care of its own members and not call its members to this higher cause.

Now here is the thing. We might wonder about those seminary students I spoke of at the beginning of the sermon, having as much exposure to Christian teaching as they have. How could they sit in church pews all those years, presumably hearing sermons, reading the Bible, taking part in discussions, and miss so completely what Jesus is all about, what Christianity is all about? But then James and John weren't listening to sermons by people who told about Jesus. They had Jesus himself. And they still didn't get it. They didn't get that being great meant being a servant.

One day a university dean received a phone call from a very irate father. The man exploded on the other end of the line, saying, "I hold you personally responsible!" He was angry because his graduate school-bound daughter had decided (in his words) to "throw it all away and go do mission work in Haiti with the Presbyterian Church." The father screamed, "Isn't that absurd! She has a degree from a good university and now she is going to dig ditches in Haiti! I hold you responsible for this!" The dean responded: "Why me?" The father shot back: "You ingratiated yourself and filled her with all this religion stuff." The dean was not easily intimidated. He asked the father: "Sir, weren't you the one who had her baptized?" "Yes", he answered. "And didn't you take her to Sunday School when she was a little girl?" "Well, yes." "And didn't you allow your daughter to go on those mission trips and ski trips when she was in high school?" "Yes", stammered the father, "but what does that have to do with anything?"

The dean said, "Sir, you're the reason she is throwing it all away. You introduced her to Jesus, not me." The man answered: "But, all we wanted was a Presbyterian!" The dean, who had an instinct for the jugular, replied, "Well, I'm sorry, sir, you messed up. You've gone and made her a disciple of Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

If it is possible for two people who lived with Jesus for something like three years, listening to him speak, watching him as he traveled about the countryside, healing and ministering to people, to miss what Jesus was all about, then it seems to me that it is possible for people like us to go to church all our lives, listening to sermons or giving them, teaching Sunday School, being a good member, elder, deacon, minister, and still not get it.

It's about being a servant. That is what Jesus said. It's about being a slave for others, serving them, taking the low position, not seeking recognition or glory or power. It's a tough lesson, and difficult to learn. It is one that really has to be learned anew each day. Each day we need to ask ourselves, "who is out there today that I am called to serve?" For if we don't learn that lesson, we have missed it all.

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Century*, October 17, 2006. p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *The Pay Problem*, by David Owen in *The New Yorker*, 10/12/2009

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> As told by Tony Campolo in a sermon