

“First and Great Redefined”

Message by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

October 18, 2015

The scriptural text for today is taken from the tenth chapter of Mark, verses 35 through 45. I’m reading from the *Common English Bible*. James and John, Zebedee’s sons, came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. They said, “Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory.” Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you’re asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?” “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said, “You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.” Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John.

Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.

This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray. God of grace and mercy, bless the reading, hearing, understanding, and doing of your word today. Cause your words to well up in us a strong desire and determination to look at ourselves closely. Amen.

In this passage, Jesus is ready to turn the corner to enter Jerusalem. He told the disciples 3 times that he'll suffer and it would end with his death, but they didn't get it. James and John asked for the best seats in heaven next to Jesus, but they needed the meaning of first and great redefined for them—again.

James and John were having thoughts of grandeur about heaven, but they weren't connecting the dots. They weren't listening. They were skipping the necessary and ordered progression—suffering and then glory. They had trouble letting go of their earthly concepts of what leadership means. They're thinking that leadership means you made it to the top. Now you can sit around and give the orders. They want to exploit and get the most out of Jesus' position, and the other disciples get angry.

Jesus says to them, “You don't know what you're asking!” Then Jesus foretells the future and what their part will be. He says they'll share his destiny, but not in the way they expect. Jesus speaks about a cup of suffering and says, “The cup that I drink you *will* drink; and with the baptism with which I will be baptized you will be baptized . . .”

On second thought, we might show James and John some grace. Maybe they're insecure and afraid. Maybe their response is an act of self-protection—not being able to comprehend what lay ahead for Jesus and for them. And we're not much different. When we feel threatened we can turn to self-preservation. *We* can see our members in our local church as rivals rather than co-workers in the body of Christ. Whatever the reason for James and John's secret request to Jesus, they hadn't yet grasped his definition for a servant leader.

Jesus turns the tables on what it means to be a leader. He reverses the definition. He states his followers will lead through service. Power is replaced with love, and retaliation is traded for forgiveness. As we follow Christ, overtime, we

learn the self-giving humility of Jesus. And if we're listening, we learn that the yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.

In a speech by Martin Luther King Jr., Mr. King states that the main objective in life is to “transform our ego by redirecting our desires away from selfish, competitive goals and towards our spiritual growth and service to others.” It's true. We see other people's selfishness more than we do our own. To look at who we really are we must admit to falling short. We have to humble ourselves and look within, and the result is we become more authentic with ourselves and others. We let go of pointing the finger, and we embrace love.

Jesus redefines a servant leader when he says, “The Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.” We're liberated from serving S E L F, and we gain blessings and freedom through ministering to others.

Following Jesus and becoming a servant leader isn't about getting what we want from God or even enjoying the good life. Jesus says to us, “You *will* drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive.” This life is not about us, it's about becoming who God wants us to become. And Jesus has this way of getting what God wants out of us, and what God wants out of us is our selfishness.

When I was around 14 years old my grandmother and grandfather came to live with my family. My grandmother had been blind for a lot of years due to diabetes, and Pappy, as we called him, gave her shots of insulin daily. From the time Pappy retired from the post office he cared for her every need. He bathed her, cooked, cleaned, did the shopping, and took her to appointments; it never seemed to end.

I bet there would've been other things he'd rather have pursued in life. I often wondered if there were times he wished he didn't have to do what he did. He

was an extremely intelligent man and probably could've done anything in life he put his mind to. I wondered if he ever thought he deserved more out of life. His wife was an orphan, and she grew up poor and wanted to become a nurse, but instead of becoming a nurse, she became the one who was served.

Often I'd go next door to the apartment my parents built for them. I watched them interact for hours. Pappy never seemed to begrudge serving her. She never begrudged being served. They had a deep love for God, and I would guess, they were the only ones praying for me as the years passed. Pappy exemplified what being servant leader was all about. He gave his life away, expecting nothing in return.

Being a servant leader isn't about having a genie in a bottle to get what we want in life; it's not about us. It's about being willing to be changed and transformed as we serve others. Jesus and his disciples didn't come to be served but to serve, and Jesus is our role model. Becoming a servant leader might not be what you thought it would be, but it is what's required of us. You'll never find it's what the world values.

The passage we looked at today shows us where the disciples were at in regard to spiritual maturity. It seems they hadn't learned much, but then again, maybe they hadn't suffered enough, just as we haven't. So my question for you is this. What's the way out of this selfish earthly cycle the disciples found themselves in? James and John were competing, the other disciples were angry at them, and nobody is getting the point. This is what I learned from the passage. We won't find peace and joy when we accept the world's values. We can't gain anything that way. Jesus reminds us that we receive through giving to others and the way we lead is by serving. We lose our lives and we gain our very souls.

Let's pray. God of compassion who rightly defines for us the way to receive. Open our hearts and minds to look within and teach us. Help us embrace what serving others does as we receive God's way and put ourselves aside. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.