

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 24/Year B  
October 21, 2018  
Text: Mark 10: 35-45

*“And he (Jesus) said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”*

There are many of us who are avid theatre and concert goers. Some of us hold season tickets to certain venues and know exactly where our seats are. When I am not performing on stage or working behind the scenes with a Hawthorne Players production, my seat over at the Florissant Civic Center Theater is stage right, seat- E2. I like that seating and if there is something else I would like to see at the theater I most often will ask if E2 is available. At the Fox, I prefer sitting within the first few rows of the mezzanine that way I don't have to strain to see over anyone's head. At the Muny, it's section B, right center. At the Repertory Theater, most often I am seated stage left, somewhere within the first couple of rows. At Busch Stadium, I will take just about any seat except in the nose bleed section. All of these and other venue seats are negotiable depending on ticket prices, of course.

This morning James and John are looking for the best seats in the house. Mark tells us that the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to Jesus asking a favor. These two were among the first disciples Jesus called when he began his ministry. They had left their father, their boat, servants, and their nets, everything, to follow him. James and John along with Peter, were in Jesus' inner circle. Like the other disciples they too, saw him heal the sick, the blind, and the lame, raise the dead to life, and feed the masses. But they also experienced things that the others had not, including Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop. Now they come to him, wanting him to grant them each a seat at his right and left in the Kingdom of God. In other words, 'they wanted to move up a little bit higher.' Their actions mimic our behaviors today. Don't they? It would be easy to judge James and John, wouldn't it? Today we call it "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" and "I worked hard for this. You owe me." And "What's in it for me?" We can only imagine Jesus looking at his disciples and sighing. Loving them but perhaps saying to himself, "Wow, you guys haven't heard a word that I've said to all of you lately, have you? You know, things like humility and servanthood and discipleship?"

Jesus does not scold James and John nor does he correct them. Instead he says 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?” In other words-‘do you have the calling as I have and do you realize that it leads to the cross?’ They answered him much like we would; ‘We can! Sure, why not?’ It was then that 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?*” In other words, to do as Jesus was doing would mean their own suffering and death. For “*his cup is that of a murdered prophet. His baptism is that of a martyr, washed in his own blood.*”\* To follow him would not lead to a simple walk or a ‘tiptoe through the tulips’ for them or for us.

Of course, the other ten heard the conversation between Jesus and James and John were quite upset by their arrogance. But why? They had already argued among themselves about who was greatest as they made their way to Capernaum in Chapter 9. Still, Jesus uses this moment to remind them once again of what he said earlier, “*...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*”

It is hard to think of ourselves in terms of being a servant or slave to anyone. It is easier to conjure up images of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper or Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta tending to the wounds of lepers. To remember how recently named St. Archbishop Oscar Romero spoke out and lost his life because of it. But for us to be seen in that light? No way! We aim to be the biggest and the best. We are too busy comparing ourselves to other people-keeping up with the haves instead of the have nots. We want those positions of power. We like to be recognized, to be heard, and to be seen. To be catered to. To have the best seats. And we want the same successes for our children, nieces and nephews, and we teach them as much. And, oh, hold the suffering, please! Not us!

I have mentioned this before but it bears repeating. The late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once preached on this gospel on servant hood. His sermon was entitled, “The Drum Major Instinct.” He began by reminding us that we all have some of the same qualities as James and John and that deep down within us is the “*drum major instinct-a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first. And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life.*”

He said we first learned it as infants-the louder we cried the quicker Mommy and/or Daddy came running to tend to our needs. Then as we grew older we never

really broke that cycle because we are people who like to be noticed, to be praised. Dr. King said, *“Nobody is unhappy when they are praised, even if they know they don’t deserve it and even if they don’t believe it. The only people unhappy about praise is when that praise is going too much toward somebody else. But everybody likes to be praised because of this real drum major instinct.”*

Dr. King went on to say that people join everything to get that attention and recognition. Advertisers also add to this way of thinking as we seek to buy what they are selling. King continued, *“In order to be a man of distinction, you must drink this whiskey. In order to make your neighbors envious, you must drive this type of car. In order to be lovely to love you must wear this kind of lipstick or this kind of perfume.”* We haven’t changed all that much, have we?

Dr. King also went on to say that the drum major instinct can also be one’s undoing and cause one to think oneself as better than. He finally turned the corner in his sermon by saying (and this is one of the greatest quotes attributed to Dr. King),

*And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. (Amen) That’s a new definition of greatness.*

*And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, (Everybody) because everybody can serve. (Amen) You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. (All right) You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. (Amen) You only need a heart full of grace, (Yes, sir, Amen) a soul generated by love. (Yes) And you can be that servant.”\*\**

Yes, we are all called to be servants; to serve our God and each other. Our greatness will not come from being high on the list or by having the best seats in the house but by walking a little differently in the world. By bringing God’s reign even nearer in our everyday lives. By asking ourselves: What would Jesus do? How would Jesus respond to certain situations and circumstances? Are we willing to drink the cup that Jesus drinks? Are we willing to be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized? Can we follow him without counting the cost?

We are to discern *everyday* what it means to love as God loves. To discern *everyday* what it means to live out our baptismal covenant. To discern *everyday* what it means to be followers of Christ as individuals and as a community of faith as Jesus has instructed us over these last couple of weeks. We are to model what true discipleship is for each other, our families, our children, our neighbors, the stranger, the world, *everybody*. Whatever we have to offer: our hands, our feet, our talents, our time, our money, our very lives; those things should be freely given with no strings attached and without seeking reward. And always, always, given with humility, love, kindness, and mutual respect.

To each of us Jesus asks, “*What is it you want me to do for you?*” Let us remember that greatness is not about who is on top and who belongs in the rear. Glory and greatness for disciples of Christ comes from being other-centered as Jesus was. Let his example be our answer.

Amen!

\*“*Are we able to drink the cup?*” an essay by Bill Carroll, The Episcopal Café, October 14, 2018

\*\* quotes taken from the late Dr. Martin Luther King’s sermon, “The Drum Major Instinct” delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on February 4, 1968.