

22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But 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?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, '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.'

One of my favorite moments in the Mister Rogers documentary we watched together a few weeks ago was the moment when a little boy came up to Fred at an event in Boston while he was doing a meet and greet. The young boy came up to Mister Rogers and, characteristically, he knelt down so he could speak face to face with the young man. The boy looked completely and utterly bewildered and he looked at his television idol and asked, "Mr. Rogers, how did you get *out*?" Mister Rogers smiled and began to explain to the young boy about the concept of television and how he wasn't literally in the box while the boy watched every week. The young boy listened intently, nodding with a look of intense concentration saying, "uh-huh, ok, yeah, hmmmmmm." When Fred finished his elaborate explanation the young boy just looked back at him and said with 100% sincerity, "But, Mr. Rogers, how will you get back *in*?"

Sometimes, it doesn't matter how carefully or frequently someone explains something to us, we just don't get it. And I'm in no way trying to suggest that children are the only ones who do this; us adults are equally guilty of it. If you need any proof of this truth, you need only turn to today's passage from the 10th chapter of Mark's Gospel.

In last week's passage, Jesus literally told the disciples that the last will be first and the first must be last. And what do James and John ask in today's passage? TO BE FIRST! A southern Jesus would have looked at James and John and said simply, "*Bless your heart!*"

They just don't get it. Mark's Gospel makes us practically cringe as we watch helplessly as the Zebedee boys fight over vanity, position, and influence. Matthew's Gospel is apparently too embarrassed on behalf of James and John so, in Matthew's version of today's story, he has their mother come and ask the question on their behalf. But Mark places the disciples' ignorance and vanity right in front of us. And that makes this a

very difficult passage because, as we will discuss shortly, it causes us to take a hard look at *our* tendency towards vanity.

But what makes these disciples' foolishness even more unbelievable is what Jesus said immediately before they asked this question. Mark 10:32-34 reads as such: "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'"

Friends, this is not the first, nor the second, but the *third* time so far in Mark's Gospel that Jesus has predicted his violent death.

Yet despite these bloody warnings, despite Jesus telling them that the first must be last, James and John ask to be seated at Jesus' left and right in his moment of glory. Jesus tells them lovingly, perhaps even sadly, that they do not understand what they are asking. And we know this to be true because the supreme irony is that the positions on the left and right of Jesus in his moment of glory are not filled by people sitting in influence but, literally, *hanging* in shame. As the old adage goes: be careful what you ask for; you just might get it.

They just don't get it. They do not know what they asking for.

But do we?

Two things come to mind when I think about this story as it relates to the people who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church.

The first thing is this: are we fully aware of, and fully honest about, the sacrifice that it takes to be a committed member of a Christian community in this world? James and John are eager to sit at Jesus' left and right because they think that it will be a place of glitz and glamour. They make a spectacle of themselves, practically shoving past one another, trying to get the biggest piece of the pie. But the irony is that they don't realize that the dish that is being served to them is a mandate for *them* to *serve* others.

In the life of this congregation many, many people have been invited to join us here at Beaumont Presbyterian Church. And we try many tactics to "sell" our congregation (and I use that verb very intentionally). To the young families, we tell them that this will be a great place to raise their children. We have great programs, great learning opportunities, and it's like instantaneously getting a huge family with built-in aunts and uncles and grandparents. To our older folks, we tell them that Beaumont is a great place to come find companionship and support and fellowship. In other words, we sell the church by telling people how much *we* can provide for *them*.

Now, friends, all of these things are well and good. This church *should* be a place where people are cared for. This church *should* be a place where people find support and fellowship. This church *should* provide for all who join us. But if we invite people by doing nothing but telling them how much they will *get out* of being here, then we are not telling the whole truth.

For example, when we invite people to church, how often do we say something like the following: “We’re so glad that you’re considering joining us here at Beaumont Presbyterian Church. It’s a great place where we try our best to love and support and care for one another. We share the love of God and we can’t wait to share that love with you and your family. But, just so you know, being part of a Christian family is a real commitment. Being a part of this family, like being a part of *any* family, takes a whole heck of a lot of work. There will be moments when it’s fun. And there will be moments when it’s tough as hell. There will be moments when you will receive. And there will be many moments when you will be called to *give*.”

Friends, that’s a tough sell in a culture that tells us that it’s all about our comfort and our convenience. Perhaps now we realize just how upside-down this kingdom really is. The last will be first. The first will be last. The least will be greatest and the greatest will be least.

The second thing this passage compels me to lift up for us this day is this: motives matter. If James and John had truly asked to be at Jesus’ left and right so that they would be in the prime positions to give of themselves and serve the needy, then I believe Jesus would have said: “Awesome! Let’s do it!” But their motives are different. They want power. They want prestige. They want influence.

Many of you in this room remember a time when this congregation had twice the amount of people on the rolls as we do right now. Many of you remember when baptisms far outnumbered funerals. We are a congregation that wants to grow or, at least, we say we do. But a difficult passage like today calls us to examine our motives before we go out to grow this congregation. Do we simply want more members because it will make us feel as important as we did 15, 20, 25 years ago? Do we simply want more members so that we’ll have more money so we can maintain our property? Do we simply want more members so that we can have the influence that the larger church down the street has?

Or...

Do we want more members so we can increase the amount of service we do in Christ’s name? Do we want more members so we can learn more together about what it means to be a fully committed disciple of Jesus? Do we want more members so we can truly make disciples and send people out in the world to be the Body of Christ?

Friends, it’s all about motives. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to grow this congregation. But we must be honest with ourselves about what that means and what sacrifices that may bring. There are times when putting the Body of Christ first means putting our comfort and convenience last. There are times when moving forward means letting go of some things. There are times, when making room for resurrection, that some things have to die in order for new things to sprout up in their place.

All these things are the work of the Upside-Down Kingdom. The work is tough, my friends. We do ourselves no favors by sugarcoating this. But there is also so much joy to be found when doing Kingdom work. There is so much beauty in what is possible when a group of broken people gather together to love one another radically and spread that love in a broken world. There is so much to be grateful for when we realize that we are called for such a time as this to not just *go* to church but to *be* the Church.

So, friends, let us go forth, following Jesus to the places he would lead us. And know that whether that road be smooth or hard, know that Jesus goes with us to spread the love of God.

Rev. Stephen M. Fearing

Beaumont Presbyterian Church

October 21st, 2018

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.