

As many of you know, I am a daughter of Divinity and I attended seminary. As part of that program, I served a year on internship. While I was serving, the congregation where I interned, they hosted a breakfast for the local cluster of pastors and other interns. Afterwards I was helping clean up, and asked the others who were there, if they would be so kind as to help the ladies by lending a hand. One of the pastors, who is female said to me, “I don’t do that. That’s not my calling” and walked away. After my stunned silence subsided, I started to ask myself, “What exactly am I supposed to do? How am I really supposed to be serving?” Those questions are taken up in our gospel lesson for today.

In these 10 short verses is a great story! But before we get started we need to set the stage, first.

Jesus has just told his disciples - for the third time – and in great detail, that he will be killed. He told them that they are on their way to Jerusalem, right now, and that He will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes; they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; who will mock him, and spit on him and flog him and kill him. That’s what Jesus has said not 2 verses prior to our lesson. There was NO mistaking what was about to happen!

You would think that the disciples would respond with concern, or anger over what is going to happen to Jesus. But the first response, recorded in our gospel lesson, is not even close.

Immediately James and John come forward and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” They don’t even tell

Jesus what they want at first! They may not want to give him the option of saying, “No”. They want to try to force him to respond to their demand by saying, “Yes”.

“We want”. Wow! There aren’t even any common courtesies given. No – “please consider this”, or – “Would you do this for us?” In fact it’s not even a question!! Just, “We want”. Bit demanding don’t you think? A little bit out-of-line? What audacity!

But Jesus doesn’t even deal with any of these dynamics. But He simply asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” This is an unbelievably calm, measured response, to a firm demand – from 2 of his own disciples no less! It’s like trying to deal with 2 children in a grocery store – “Daddy, Daddy, we want ice cream!” “Mommy, Mommy, we want candy!” And yet Jesus is patient with them.

When James and John respond to Jesus’ question; again there are no common courtesies. There is: No – “Please consider”, nor any “Would you do this for us”. Again it’s not a question – it’s a demand. “Grant (Give) us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.” Give us the best seats – is what they demand Jesus do for them. Whenever a King gave a banquet, the best seats in the house were at the King’s right and left side. And that’s what James and John want. They want the best seats - beside Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t even ask them, “Haven’t you heard anything I just said to you?” He doesn’t tell them how disappointing or hurtful their demand must have made him feel. He simply tells them that they

don't know what they are asking. But Jesus knows that you don't get to the top simply by asking for it.

So, He asks them another question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

These may seem like odd questions. But "the cup" was a Jewish phrase they would have understood. It was customary at royal banquets for the King to hand a cup to his guests. This was symbolic of the King's invitation to enjoy the experience of his banquet. "The cup" became a symbol for the life and experience that God handed out to each person. In Psalm 23, which is very familiar to most of us – verse 5 says: "My cup runneth over, or my cup overflows". It's the psalmist's way of saying that his life and the experiences of happiness that God had given him were more than he could hold. On the other hand in Psalm 75:8 we read, "In the hand of the Lord there is a cup for the wicked" that God would give them to drink, that would be full of woe. "Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink? Can you drink the cup of suffering that God has given me?" This is what Jesus is asking. And be baptized with the Baptism with which I am baptized?" -Now, the greek word for "Baptized" in this sentence, means to be "submerged" in an experience. It is said that, We can be drowning/submerged in debt; the grieving person is overwhelmed /submerged in sorrow.

What Jesus is asking his disciples - are two questions:

**1.** Can you drink this cup – the experience of suffering and dying that I will drink? Can you be wounded for others? Can you suffer and be crushed with pain?

**2.** Can you be baptized/submerged in the terrible experiences that are waiting for me? Can you be submerged in other people mocking, spitting and hitting you with a whip until your back is cut open to the bone? Can you be submerged in their hate, and pain, until they kill you? These are the questions that Jesus is asking his disciples.

Believe it or not, James and John answer Jesus by saying “We are able.” It’s surprising that Jesus never second guesses them. He Never says, “Are you sure?” But simply takes them at their word and says to them: “The cup that I drink, you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized.” Jesus then says, ‘But about your earlier demand, to sit at my right hand or at my left - that’s not mine to grant. But it’s for those for whom it has been prepared.” James and John don’t realize that when Jesus comes into His glory it won’t be on a throne; but on a cross, and the two who are at his right hand and left hand will be bandits.

Some people say we should not be too hard on James and John. Perhaps they thought they had a right to ask for the best seats. They were after all part of Jesus’ inner circle of 3 – Peter, James and John. Jesus took them almost everywhere he went. They also came from a well off family – their father Zebedee was wealthy enough to hire servants to run some of his fishing boats; so maybe they were raised with a “we deserve the best” mentality. But whatever the reason, this passage shows they were not the only ones thinking this way. When the other 10 disciples heard what had happened -they got angry. “Hey, how dare you ask for what all of us should have a shot at! We want the best seats too!!” “We’ve all been following Jesus!”

It's here that Jesus radically changes the conversation. He says, "Hey, you know how the Gentile rulers love to walk around with their nose in the air, and lord it over other people, including you! And their great ones act as tyrants! It is not so with you!! (Notice the present tense! It doesn't say – it WILL not be so with you. It says, it **IS** not so with you.) You are not competing for the best seats in the house! That's not your goal. It is not like that for all of you!

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you, must be slave of all."

The greek word for "servant" here means: to minister to one who is a relative or family member – a household servant. So Jesus is saying: Whoever wishes to become great among you – great among his disciples - must serve or minister to each other, as if they are a relative or part of their family! We had a good group of people this past week helping out with the Youth Garage Sale (even one of our new members!). They chose to serve our youth because they are part of our family!

The second phrase, "Whoever wishes to be first among you, must be slave of all" - the greek word for slave means: a slave who has no freedom except to obey. They are completely in the service of another. So Jesus is saying here: Whoever wishes to be first among you must be completely in the service of others; with no freedom to do anything except obey.

These words are incredibly clear; and they are very precise. Jesus makes it clear that being close to him does not entitle his disciples to

places of honor. Jesus reminds them that: “He, himself came not to be served, but to serve: to become someone who is completely at the service of others; with no personal freedom, except to obey His Father; To give His Life, a ransom for many.”

Having Jesus in our lives never gives us special powers or privileges – neither then, nor now. This lesson asks us to reflect on where we are on the “I Want” to “I Serve” continuum. And it is a continuum. We are rarely either totally one or the other.

It’s a struggle because we live in a world that recognizes & rewards power and prestige. Many world leaders still fight for dominance and power, look at the Taliban, Putin, Assad and many others. But servants put the needs of others FIRST. People like Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In fact King said in a sermon on this text, that “down deep, within all of us is an instinct. It’s kind of a drum major instinct – a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first.” He knew this was human nature, and he felt it in himself. But he concluded his sermon by saying, that at his funeral he would like somebody to say that he tried, “to give his life serving others...to feed the hungry... to clothe those who were naked... to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

Another servant of Jesus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a Lutheran pastor in World War II Germany: who, at the urging of friends, came to America to escape persecution by Hitler, wrote “I have come to

the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period, in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war, if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.” He, as you know, was killed by the Nazis less than a month before the war ended.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, decided that his wanting to live; was not more important, than the need to serve his people. How about you and I? Where are we on the I Want to, I Serve continuum? Jesus wills all His people to join Him in a life of service to others. To serve others as if they are Family. To serve with no freedom to do anything, except obey our Lord. How are we doing that?

We even ask young people who are Affirming Their Baptism, “Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism...to serve ALL people, following the example of Jesus?”

There are many opportunities to serve. We know that. You can serve at a Food Bank – the Parma Heights Food Bank needs volunteers badly. Since our food pantry is closed due to Covid, we have been referring people to them, but they need help to stock shelves and package food. You can also choose to serve others in your home, which would probably make your spouse, parent, or siblings very happy. You can serve by helping with some household chores. You can also serve through many opportunities here at Divinity; by helping around the grounds of the church, or by assisting the Ladies of the Yarn who knit or crochet year round to make hats, scarves, baptismal blankets, and items for Redeemer Crisis Center, the Men’s

homeless shelter and others in need. You can also choose to serve by praying for others, and joining our Prayer Chains, who pray everyday for people who request our prayers. You may also chose to serve our Afghan Refugee family by serving on the Refugee Team. They need help now. Please prayerfully consider all these opportunities!

I must admit that when I first researched this passage, I said to myself, Well, I really don't need to be great or First; maybe just being part of the group would be OK. Whatever the number. Maybe you thought the same thing. But that does not relieve us of Jesus command to serve, all people. For Jesus, God is the Lord to whom all believers owe unreserved service.

And the difference of greatness in the Kingdom of the World and the Kingdom of God – is that in the K of the World – greatness is measured by how many people are in the army that serves the ruler? How many people can be made to do what He wants? On how many people can He impose his authority? In the K of God, greatness is measured, not in reducing other people to your service, but in reducing ourselves to their service! The question is not what service can I get? But what service can I give? It is only when we put more into life, than we take out, namely by serving others, that life becomes much better for both of us! Do we leave situations, challenges, and things better than we found them? Do we leave People better than we found them? These are the things we need to consider.

Jesus sets the example for us. Even though He was in the form of God, He emptied himself taking the form of a servant. A suffering

servant, who was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

We love because He first loved us. He served us by giving His life for us. And asks us to do the same for sake of those in need around us. Jesus allowed himself to be lifted up; Not on a pedestal, but on a cross. Offering His Body and Blood to bring us forgiveness and new life. The cup he offers us is His own blood shed for us, for the forgiveness of sin. The bread He offers us is His body, broken for us. This is how Jesus serves us.

And this is what gives us the ability and the power to serve. Jesus never asks us to do anything, he will not empower us to do. And we have received His power not only in His Body and Blood, but also in His spirit which lives in us and through us.

James and John may not have started out with the best understanding of who Jesus was, but they did believe in Him and his victory. Even though he was hated and opposed by the religious leaders themselves, James & John had amazing confidence and loyalty to Him. Were they misguided? Yes. But their hearts were in the right place. And in the end, they did serve Jesus all the days of their lives. Even to giving their lives.

History shows us that they were able to drink “the cup”. James died 17 years after his call to service. He was the first disciple to die for the gospel. Herod Agrippa had James killed by the sword in 44A.D. John also suffered; he was imprisoned for preaching and healing in Jesus name, and he took care of Jesus mother, Mary. But he was

exiled to the island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation, and where he died, alone – the last of the 12. He was the only disciple to die of old age.

May we as disciples in this current time, follow their example, and serve Jesus, The servant of God, in lives of service to all.

Amen