

Sermon Proper 24 B
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Here we have an embarrassing episode in the continuing story of disciples who don't get it. The gospels are filled with accounts of hapless apostles and clueless followers for whom Jesus' message was still beyond their reach no matter how long they traveled with him. Further evidence of the radical message of Jesus and how difficult it is for them and for us to get our minds wrapped around it.

James and John approach Jesus to ask for special favors for themselves. Clearly they've been thinking about this and talking about it because they come together and know what they want from him.

Now, here are some lessons we can all learn from this story. To start with, be sure you know what you're asking for before you ask. And, don't ask for special favors the same day your leader has predicted his passion and death. Don't be so quick to say that you can drink from the chalice and be baptized with his baptism. At least have the presence of mind to ask him: **what chalice** and **what baptism**? And, don't ask special favors from someone who can't grant them and wouldn't play favorites even if he could. And never ever ever ask for special favors and promotions within earshot of your co-workers!

As I said, another embarrassing episode in the story of the hapless disciples. James and John have completely misunderstood the kind of power Jesus had, the nature of his leadership and the promised kingdom to which they will go. They have also decided to ride to prominence on the coattails of their leader, trying to see what might be in it for them when Jesus comes

into his own. Have these two disciples even been listening to Jesus? It makes you wonder about these two!

But the other disciples are not that much better. They are furious with James and John. But not, apparently, because James and John have misunderstood the message of Jesus. No, it seems as though they are furious because they're afraid that James and John will beat them out for the best places and the highest honors. So, Jesus talks to all of them, **yet again**, about what it means to be with him, what it means to be a disciple.

My movement, Jesus says, is not about being first or greatest or lording it over everybody else. You already have examples of that in every area of your life. Moving up the social ladder. That's not what I am about, Jesus says. In fact, he tells them, I am inviting you to turn that model upside down. Jesus invites them, invites us, to a life marked by service, mutuality and downward mobility. "If any among you would be great," Jesus says, "let him serve the rest."

As a colleague of mine, Martin Copenhaver puts it: "We are all trying to get somewhere in this life and, although we may envision that destination in different ways, for the most part, where we are trying to get could be described as "ahead." We may not have lofty aspirations but we're willing to go anywhere as long as it's forward. We may not be particularly driven, but we would still like to work our way up closer to the front of the line. We may not consider ourselves social climbers, but we would rather sit closer to the head table than to the kitchen... we may not be notably ambitious, but if there is a ladder of success, we....would prefer not to go downWhich is to say, by the standards of today's gospel, we've got it all wrong."

It is no wonder that this message was difficult for James and John and the other disciples. It is still incredibly difficult for most of us. We are

programmed to look for success, to plan for it, measure it, celebrate it. We assume that being first in line and bigger and better is the way to go, in our own lives and in the life of our church. But that is not Jesus' way.

Someone told me about a race held in India a long time ago called the Slow Cycling Race. (Now, I was told that this is a true story. But, even if it isn't it makes a very good point!) When the gun sounded the contestants didn't rush to the finish line. Some didn't even move for a long time. Then, when they did, it was unbelievably slowly. Turns out that the object of the race was to come in last! And when you won, that is, when you got there first, you would discover that you had won the wrong race. You had actually lost.

Now, our Christian lives are like that. We may be trying to win the wrong race. The measure of the disciple of Jesus is the measure of service, humility, taking the last place. In my ministry I work in a lot of parishes. And, there are always questions about what constitutes "success." It is easy to make comparisons with other parishes that are bigger, or different, with more staff, more programs, more activities. And, it is normal to think like that. But the real question for all of us individually and as parish communities is a question about the quality of our service. Whether we are caring for one another without trying to lord it over each other. Whether our lives are growing in this downward mobility of Jesus, seeking first last and always to be where he is, washing feet, serving the poor, hanging out with the people who don't fit. That is where we are invited. That is who we are invited to be.

I think of the local parish as a laboratory for the gospel. We try out here these radical ideas of Jesus. Get the kinks out, as it were! Figure out how to live like this- or at least try to live like this. And then we take our

show on the road! We live like servants the way Jesus did in the world to which we are sent, among those with whom we live and work and those with whom we share a city and a nation and a planet.

Is this a life you want? Is this a life this parish wants? Can you help one another do it? Can you support and encourage one another in a way of life which is challenging and countercultural? And just plain hard at times! But Christian. And filled with grace and joy. And the life to which we are called in the gospel. So, what do we say? As we gather around this altar to eat the bread of heaven and drink from the chalice that Jesus offers us, what will you say today?

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the servant of all."

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.