

Sermon: PENTECOST 21, October 18th, 2015

In the Name...

The boss called one of his employees into the office. "Jack," he said, "you've been with the company for a year now. You started in the stock room, a month later you were promoted to a sales position, two months after that you were promoted to district manager and four months later, you were promoted to vice-president. Now, it's time for me to retire, and I want you to take over the company. What do you say to that?" "Gee, Thanks," said the employee. "Thanks?" the boss replied, "Is that all?" "No, you're right", the employee said. "Thanks, Dad."

Today, our Gospel presents us with two characters named James and John. Who were they? The sons of a fishmonger named Zebedee and the business partners of Peter and Andrew. They were also the first cousins of Jesus. That's right. The person Matthew calls "the mother of the sons of Zebedee", the person Mark calls "Salome", and the person John calls "Jesus' mother's sister", are one and the same. Mary's sister Salome was married to Zebedee and their sons were James and John.

No wonder James and John are always hanging around Jesus in the gospels - they grew up together! They went to school, played, fell out of trees; were best friends. They were very close to Jesus. He invited them into the private room when Jairus' daughter was raised. They were invited to witness the Transfiguration and keep watch in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It's sometimes hard for us to think of Jesus as a real person. We've been conditioned by Hollywood and Sunday School to see him as an ethereal, almost mythological, figure. It's incidents like the one in today's Gospel that remind us he was part of a human family just as we are and he had relatives with their own agendas.

Here, his cousins ask, "We want you to do something for us." Don't you love it when people come up to you like that? "Would you do me a favour?" That's often a warning sign that it's not something we really want to do and in this case James and John are asking Jesus, in view of the family connection, for nothing less than the chief positions of power when he becomes king – the right and the left of the throne.

But, we all know that while those are the chief places of honour, how long would it be before the one sitting on the left decided he might prefer the view from the right? Hey, if they're ambitious enough to ask for the best, one of them might get better ideas down the road.

Power is a limited commodity. There's only so much to go around. Those who have it want to protect what they have and those who don't have much want more than they have. Using power as a standard or measure of position and status always leads to jealousy and conflicts. You see that in the reaction of the other ten when word leaks out of what these two have asked. They're furious with them.

And, so, Jesus calls them together for a "come to me" meeting and while he rejects power as a measure, he nonetheless makes it clear that in his kingdom there is position and status, but, position and status based on a different concept - servanthood.

Jesus is always turning our human values upside down. In our world, a servant has no rank; a servant has no power. And if that's true today in 21st C America it was a thousand times truer in 1st C Israel, because it wasn't just servants who were at the bottom of the food chain.

The twelve disciples knew all about being powerless, about seeing their country overrun with European settlers backed by a powerful army, taking all the good land. They were constantly under pressure to move out or conform to an alien culture and religion. Matthew had tried to climb the power ladder by collaborating as a tax collector and, yes, he got some position and wealth. Of course, he also got hated by everybody else.

So, when Jesus talked about servants and slaves as the models for leadership in the church that took a lot of swallowing. And it still does. We human beings love to organize things and so we tend to think in organizational terms. The pyramid. A few at the top, lots on the bottom, that's our mental image of life.

The only thing is that it doesn't work with God and it won't do to use that kind of language about the church.

Now, can anybody tell me the name of the President of India? Really? India is the world's second largest nation; the world's sixth largest GDP; it's got a military with nuclear bombs; and the guy who controls all this is not a household name. But, on the other hand, I think we all know the name of an Albanian nun who dedicated her life to serving the poor of Calcutta.

Mother Teresa never held office or private wealth. She never aspired to influence people or events or in any way be a success as the world judges success. She enjoyed nothing of what every graduating high school or college senior considers important - salary, family, career prospects. Yet she patterned her life after the one she called Lord. The one, in fact, whom we also call Lord, the one who came not to be served, but, to serve; the one who had access to everything and chose to use nothing; the one who set the example.

Only a few will have power in this world, but, being a servant is an option open to all of us. Servants of God, servants of our fellow men.

For Christian servanthood is an industry where nobody is unemployed. There's always enough work to go round. And the best part is, we're all related to the boss.

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