

Sermon

Proper 24B October 20, 2024

Mark 10:35-45

Jesus and the disciples are continuing their journey to Jerusalem. Between last week's gospel and today's reading are three verses that set the stage for today. In those three verses we hear Jesus give his third and final Passion prediction saying that in Jerusalem he will be condemned to death, be killed, and rise after three days.

One of the characteristics of Mark's gospel is that the disciples frequently do not understand what is going on with Jesus. As a friend of mine is fond of saying, "They aren't called the DUH-sciples for nothing"

Today, though, there's a glimmer of understanding by James and John. After this third Passion prediction, a light seems to go off in their heads. If Jesus is going to rise again after three days, then he's got to be some kind of special. And if he's that special, then we want to be part of that ruling class when he comes into his glory. They had had enough of being the low man on the totem pole. They had had enough of being used and abused by the Roman occupation. Finally understanding what resurrection might mean, they want to ensure that they will become members of the new ruling class. So they ask, "Grant that we may sit, one on your right and one on your left, when you come into your glory." But, as per Mark, even with that bit of insight, they just don't get it.

The other ten hear of this and become angry with the two brothers. I have to think, though, that the ten were less angry with James and John for asking this question than they were with themselves for not thinking to ask first. So, with dissension brewing in the ranks, Jesus calls the disciples together for a little lesson on leadership.

What Jesus tells his disciples, and all those who claim to follow him down through the ages, is that we are called to be different. We are called to present a different way of being and leading from how the world operates. When it comes to how we present ourselves and our leadership to the world, we are to be counter to what the world expects.

Jesus calls their attention to Gentile rulers. In the context of his day, that meant primarily the Romans. I suppose it could have also included Herod, who, although a Jew, served at the pleasure of the Roman governor. But Jesus is primarily drawing attention to non-Jews, or “others.” For us today, we can pretty much think of any leader from the local to the national level.

What Jesus says then is true today: there are leaders who lord that over their people and who are tyrants. They use their power to arrange for special treatment. They arrange for enemies to be imprisoned or eliminated. They manage to pass laws for thee but not for me. Jesus knew that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This is not us. This is not how followers of Christ are to behave.

Once again Jesus turns the tables and reminds them of what he has been saying for a while. If you want to be great, you must become a servant. If you want to become first, you must become a slave to all. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus, Second Person of the Trinity, God incarnate, Lord of lords and King of kings, did not come to lord his leadership over anyone, but to serve - to serve the sick, the lost, the hungry, the downtrodden. You want to become great? Become a servant.

This message of Christ is more important now than it has been in a very long time.

Unfortunately the message of Christ has been ignored or twisted by certain groups of people to ensure that they become part of the new ruling class. The rise of Christian nationalism is based on a twisted message of power and retribution. They take James' and John's request to the extreme. That is, when Christ returns in glory, they want to be seated next to him in power. Additionally, they aren't satisfied to wait for Christ's return to gain power, they want that power now, and they want retribution for all the perceived wrongs committed against them. The Christian nationalism movement lures people in with promises of power and retribution. And that is a very dangerous message.

But look at the message Jesus actually proclaims – You are not called to lord power over others, nor are you called to be tyrants. If you want to be great, you must become a servant. If you want to be first, you must become a slave to all.

We are not called to make this a Christian nation. We are not called to punish those with whom we disagree. We are not called to rule over others. We are not called to create power structures that benefit the right type of Christian.

What we are called to do is to speak truthfully. We are called to speak against those who harm others. We are called to serve – widows, orphans, children, the sick, the homeless, the hungry, and all those in need. We are called to feed others physically, spiritually, and mentally.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: if your Christianity calls you to harm others, then you aren't following Christ.

In these days, be very wary of how individuals and churches want to wield their power. Because the only acceptable request according to Jesus is not, "Grant us to sit at your right and left when you come into your glory," but, "Grant us the humility to serve others in your name."

Amen.