

“Greatness Through Service”

Mark 10:35- 45

October 22, 2006

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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.’

Prayer.

Today, I’m doing something completely different. It is easy for me as a clergyman to criticize military and paramilitary organization as instruments of violence in a world that Jesus seeks to recreate into God’s peaceable kingdom. I don’t criticize the soldier; rather, I criticize the use of violence always, everywhere, and without exception.

What is completely different and out of character for me is the fact I’m turning to the United States Marine Corp as a resource for today’s sermon. I see the armed forces as an excellent means of leadership development for many, though, not all, imparting maturity and experience in today’s young adults. If only they would loose the guns ...

The Marines, to their credit, list traits they’ve come to know as important characteristics of leadership development. Some of these attributes they identify include dependability, courage, decisiveness, endurance, enthusiasm, initiative, integrity, judgment, justice, knowledge, tact, unselfishness, and loyalty.

¹ As found at: <http://www.uspharmd.com/usmc/mcleader.htm>

Nowhere do I see self-promotion.

Society seeks leaders who are dependable; people you can count on. We look to people who can make a decision, sometimes tough decisions, and stick to them. We look for those who can embrace every challenge with excitement, curiosity, and creativity. We look for qualities of fairness, intellect and loyalty. We look for people who are not selfish; who place the needs of others before their own needs. These are important qualities we should seek in our leaders. This is especially poignant from where we sit this day a little over two weeks away from elections.

These are the leadership qualities the Marine Corp seeks. This is what we should look for when it comes to selecting people to represent us in the halls of congress. And these are also many of the same traits Jesus seeks in his disciples.

James and John said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

Makes you wonder what went through Jesus' mind before he answered. Does he consider the denial and betrayal that awaits him? How about James and John falling asleep on him in the Garden of Gethsemane? At least three times before this encounter Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer, die, and be buried only to rise again. Had anyone been listening?

"You do not know what you are asking." Jesus told them. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" To drink the cup he drinks is to agree to the same consequence ... which is to say, if you're going to live like Christ you must be prepared to die like Christ; impaled on a cross, publicly humiliated, ridiculed, and scorned.

To be baptized with the baptism of Christ is to be brought up out of the water, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, only then to be led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights.

James and John should be careful what they wish for, for they just might end up getting it.

Jesus tells them, "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."

Whether you like it or not, it doesn't make any difference, God is in control. This is God's world. God makes the rules and judges accordingly. It is as simple as that.

God decides the breadth and depth of Law; but he does so with our best interest at heart. God is the one and only judge of our righteousness, of living according to His rules; but he does so with compassion and forgiveness, always seeking our repentance.

Being a favored disciple doesn't come from whether one sits at Jesus' right hand, left hand, or out in the audience. Discipleship isn't about playing favorites; rather, it allows one to be evaluated by God, so He can plan accordingly ... "it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

Last Sunday, in the immediately preceding piece of scripture about the rich, young ruler, we learned that there is a mission for Christian leaders. The mission is to lift up God, follow God's laws, unburden yourself by getting rid of your money and things, and redistribute your wealth by giving it to the poor. Jesus' priority is to reach out to the poor, to share our wealth, to redistribute such that no one in the world is in want. "Then, come, follow me," Jesus says.

Those who play by these simple rules, who accept for themselves God's mission and priorities, are the ones for whom God is making preparations – eternal preparations.

Jesus is telling James and John: "Instead of promoting yourself, you need to become more than my disciple in name only. You need to make your mission my mission; make your priorities my priorities."

Anger flares. Not with Jesus, but rather with the other disciples, who looked at James and John as peers, and now felt betrayed by them because they went to Jesus in private to seek their own promotion. They had a right to be angry. I'd be angry, too.

But this is a teachable moment for Jesus. He draws them together and reveals a little bit more about his mission and priorities. He teaches them, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Addressing poverty may be Christ's first priority, but a close second is the ideal of service. This isn't a leadership ideal identified by the Marine Corp, but it is by our Savior. This isn't a leadership quality that employer's look for on a resume, but it should be.

Service above self is completely counter-cultural in today's world. The world expects us to ascend to higher and higher levels of responsibility, and greater levels of influence. The world expects blue collar workers to aspire to white collar workers, for white collar workers to aspire to professionals, and for professionals to aspire to authorities in their field.

The measure of success is the almighty dollar. The symbol of being a successful leader is where you live, the size of your house, and the school district where you send your children. And the sign of this success is in what kind of car you drive or the size and location of your office.

Tell me that I'm wrong.

But Jesus scrambles all the rules. He is telling us that the measure of success for his disciples is how many you've served, not how much you've made. The position that all should aspire is the dish washer, the apple picker, the floor cleaner – the lowest service position one can find, where talents can be fully utilized.

There is more here than meets the eye. Jesus implies that not only is it important to put ourselves into a position to serve others, but that when the time comes for promotion, our promotion will not be done by others, our supervisors, our boss, or someone of higher authority. Rather, our promotion comes from God, and from God alone; when He reaches down, takes hold of our hand, lifts us up and says, "My daughter – My son – your faith has made you well; enter now my Father's heavenly kingdom."

Promotion, status, and – ultimately – salvation, comes from God. It doesn't come from others. Oh, the recognition and validation from others are nice. It adds to the picture framed pronouncements and plaques hanging on our walls. But in the end, it is only God's judgment that will matter.

It is possible to make the point, as many theologians have, that there was no greater gift of service than Jesus' gift of his life in exchange for our sins. Just as he served, so, too, should we serve others, with the same measure of grace, forgiveness, love, and acceptance. So, too, should we serve others by reaching out to the poor and disadvantaged, the sick, the prisoner, and the shut-in.

There is great freedom in giving up the cultural drive to push us ever upward and onward to new jobs, new positions, more money, better circumstances. Give it up and you'll find you have a lot more time on your hands. Give it up, and use the time to devote to serving others, growing

where you are planted, content with what God has provided, using the skills God has given.

In God's kingdom, greatness comes through service. It comes when we loose the self, and in its place, we allow only God to thrive. Dearly beloved, these are the words of God, as they have come to us this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.