

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Measure of Greatness"

First preached March 4, 2012; revised for 2020

Scripture: Mark 10:32-45; Philippians 2:1-11

Opening Hymn: O God, our help in ages past 330 (1,3,5,6)

Closing Hymn: Make me a channel of your peace 740

Children's Hymn: Jesus, remember me 206

Choir: "Let All the People Praise Thee" Natalie Sleeth

Choruses: I desire Jesus, Blessed be your name

Rev. Steve Filyk

March 8, 2020

I had never paid such close attention to Canadian politics.  
It was just so intriguing.

A big Canadian corporation facing criminal charges  
for fraud and bribery.

The Prime Minister's Office lobbying the attorney general  
For a deferred prosecution agreement.

A protest from the attorney general with recorded conversations.

The resignation of two cabinet ministers  
And principle secretary to the Prime Minister.

The early retirement of the Clerk of the Privy Council.

The ethic commissioner ruling  
That there was undue influence.<sup>i</sup>

I never paid such close attention to Canadian politics.

All this intrigue within a government,  
Within the same political team:  
bullying, name-calling, lying.

It was just so astonishing.

Of course, that's politics.  
In the end we expect politics to be dirty.

But in the church, we expect things to be different.  
We say that Christ is the head of the church.  
We talk about love and service as the church's calling.

You wouldn't think there wouldn't be a lot of room  
for selfish pursuits in this place.

And yet it doesn't take long to realize  
That the church is also a place  
Where people push their own agendas  
And build their own little kingdoms.

Using the church as a vehicle  
For one's own selfish ambitions  
May seem astonishing,  
But it isn't really anything new.

PAUSE

In today's lesson Jesus makes his third passion prediction.  
Jesus tells the disciples  
that he is heading to Jerusalem to die  
(and rise again).

But this repeated warning falls on deaf ears.  
No sooner has he talked about death  
and James and John, the sons of Zebedee,  
are cozying up to him:

'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

'What is it you want me to do for you?' Jesus asked.

'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand  
and one at your left, in your glory.' they said.<sup>ii</sup>

Just to be clear  
The disciples aren't asking to be seated beside Jesus  
At the next party.

They are asking for political appointments.  
Appointments with honor and power.

In ancient near eastern culture,  
positions on either side of a ruler or host  
were those with the most honour.<sup>iii</sup>

In effect they are asking  
if James can be the Deputy Prime Minister,  
and John the Minister of Finance.  
They are lobbying Jesus for power.

The great irony, of course, is that Jesus  
has just been telling them  
that his mission, his ministry  
will lead to suffering and death.

When Jesus asks them if they are able  
to drink the cup that he will drink  
(to share in his baptism)  
they are still fantasizing about privilege.

The brothers are thinking about a coronations and celebrations  
instead of an execution.

This self-promotion causes a stir  
Among Jesus' other followers.

We are told that when the other disciples  
hear about the Zebedee brother's bold request  
they get angry with them.

Maybe it's not so much that they found the brothers manipulative,  
but that they were angry they didn't make the move first.

But Jesus turns this turmoil into a teaching moment.  
Once again, he redefines what it means to be a leader  
in his community.

He asks the disciples to reflect on how it is in the world around them.  
So how is it?

Rulers lord over their subjects.  
And the great ones are tyrants.

The CEO calls in his VP and chews him out  
for the last quarter's poor performance.  
The VP takes it on the chin,  
and makes his apologies.

The VP then calls in his underlings  
and continues the pattern of abuse.  
This continues all the way down the totem pole.

The janitor kicks his dog when he arrives home  
At the end of his shift.

We are taught that this is leadership.  
This is expected behavior.  
And so, all we can do is hope  
that we are the ones at the top.

But Jesus upends this ideal  
to promote a different way of living.  
He encourages his followers to aspire to service  
rather than lording power over one another.

“‘For you,’ [Jesus] says,  
‘the route to gaining influence is not taking power.  
Influence gained through power and control  
doesn’t really change society;  
it doesn’t change hearts.

I’m calling you to a totally different approach.  
Be so sacrificially loving that the people around you,  
who don’t believe what you believe,  
will soon be unable to imagine the place without you.

They’ll trust you  
because they see that you’re not only out for yourself,  
but out for them, too.

When they voluntarily begin to look up to you  
because of the attractiveness of your service and love,  
you’ll have real influence.

It will be an influence given to you by others,  
not taken by you from others.”<sup>iv</sup>

Do you know what Jesus is talking about?  
Have you ever accepted someone's leadership  
because you knew they were looking out  
for your best interests.

Do others accept your leadership for the very same reason?

I heard a story about Jeff Torrans,  
The leader of the Focus Club at TRU.

Some of the volunteers at Focus Club were questioning  
How he was caring for the students that he connected with.  
He was sacrificing his time and energy,  
Driving them here and driving them there.

They felt like he was being taken advantage of,  
And asked him why he was doing it.

He told them he realized that, yes,  
some might be taking advantage of him  
But that he was trying to demonstrate  
God's unconditional love.

Not it was clear to me  
That the person who told me this  
Has incredible respect for Jeff.

She now understands just how much he cares,  
She recognized the embodiment of God's love.

So how about you,  
Do you embody God's love in your leadership?

Do you volunteer because you want to help  
or because you want others to respect you?

How much of your service is performed out of a genuine desire to care?  
And how much is offered to remain in control?

Becoming aware of our own motivations,  
is an important step in embracing Christ's vision.  
And yet awareness in itself  
doesn't remedy the situation.

I find it interesting that today's passage is  
the third time that in Mark that Jesus seeks to correct  
his followers understanding of greatness.

In Chapter 8 he tells them that they  
have to lose their life to find it.  
In chapter 9 he tells them  
that whoever wants to be first must be last.

Now he tells them that  
those who wish to become great  
must learn to become servants.

The fact that Jesus needs to repeat this message again and again,  
reveals the resistance inherent in humanity.



So is there any hope is reprogramming  
That Zebeedee dna? Maybe.

Jesus tells James and John  
that they will drink his cup and share in his baptism.  
For us these words sound ominous and threatening:  
portents that they also will be crucified.

And yet “in the larger context of the story,  
Jesus’ words may also be read as an extraordinary promise:

“[James and John, you] will not always be  
driven by your fears and your need for security.

Rather, you will be empowered to take up your cross  
[you will be empowered to serve me sacrificially,  
you will be enabled to follow me genuinely].<sup>v</sup>

This is the very reason Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem.  
He wasn’t walking into death  
just to provide us with another good example.

He was following in obedience  
to rescue us from our selfishness  
and ransom us from our sin.

As we come to him in prayer and confession  
As we share in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper,  
We are empowered to follow in his path and serve in his way.

Amen.

<sup>i</sup> See “SNC-Lavalin Affair”

<sup>ii</sup> see Mark 10:35ff

<sup>iii</sup> D. E. Nineham *Saint Mark* 283

<sup>iv</sup> Timothy Keller *King’s Cross* 149.

<sup>v</sup> Charles L. Campbell “Proper 24: Mark 10:35-45” *Feasting on the Word* homiletical perspective 191, 193