The Very Rev. Jonathan Thomas
Proper 24B (Mark 10:35-45)
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# We Will Walk in Love

At the first church I served there was a man named Michael who was your classic superstar church volunteer. He had over the course of a very long connection with the parish been warden and treasurer, head usher, lector and intercessor, led stewardship and mission trips. He was largely at the retired stage of his church volunteer career, but when I needed someone to help teach a confirmation class to a group of eighth grade boys, I asked Mike. Partially because I thought he would be a great role model for those kids, and partially because I really needed someone and he had demonstrated over a very long period of time that he had trouble saying no when the church asked him to do something, and, if I'm honest, partially because it gave me the chance to spend some extra time with him and that was always a blessing.

Not too long after that confirmation class ended, Michael informed us that he had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of dementia. I had grown close to him in a relatively short period of time and went to meet with him. I was also a fairly new priest and wanted to be a great pastor and assured him that just like he had been faithful to the church for many years we would surround him and care for him, walk with him and love him every step until the end. He smiled at me and said, "thank you, but you have no idea what you're promising." He was right. Before it was over he also got cancer. He was intermittently in pain and lost, and it was hard when he was out of it and hard in a different way when he had times of lucidity. It was profoundly difficult for all of us who walked with him and it was also a beautiful journey of faith and love. It was frustrating and heartbreaking, maddening and completely holy. I'm not sure I would have made the promise I did if I knew the toll it would take and I'm sure I would be a lesser priest and person if I had not gone through it all.

Mike would hate it if he knew I was drawing a parallel between him and Jesus in today's reading, but here it is. The sons of Zebedee, already two of the three core disciples, approach Jesus and tell him, "we want you to give us whatever we ask." What an audacious set-up. Sounds like something my six-year-old would say, not two grown men. But Jesus lets them go on. They ask to sit on his right and left sides as he rules as the Christ. He replies that they have no idea what they're asking, because the way of the Christ is the way of the cross, the way of suffering and serving, of giving and sacrificially loving and not being loved back. Then the other disciples catch wind of this conversation and they are angry, not at James and John's misunderstanding but at the fact that they tried to jump the queue. So Jesus has to tell all of them that they are simply molding his ministry into the pattern of the world, where the powerful rule and lord it over others, but instead he is leading them to serve those who seem least deserving, to give without reciprocation, to lay down their lives in love for others. James and John want authority, but what Jesus is offering and asking for was tenacious solidarity, true community, incarnational love that he could touch and feel and would stand beside him when he hung on a cross.

It would be nice to say that the church had internalized that message over the centuries, but we still like to be in proximity to power more than near to Christ. We prefer ease to suffering and the ruling to serving. We want wealth and influence, a sense of being important and consequential. We want actual power at times or at least access to it, like you would get sitting to

the right or the left of it. And I am aware that I am not preaching this in just any church, but the Cathedral of the City, as we call ourselves, and the seat of the Diocese. People come here for all sorts of reasons but there is a certain type of person who comes to the Cathedral because it is the Cathedral and that has a certain meaning. There's no judgment in that from the guy who went through a whole process to be named dean of said cathedral. It's just a gentle reminder to us that to be leaders in this faith tradition is to serve and to give and to offer our lives for others, because Jesus redefined the Messiah as the one who loved and served and saved us.

This is stewardship Sunday, when we hand out pledge packets and a priest normally stands up and makes a pitch for you to make your financial promise for the coming year. But that's not really my plan. Make no mistake, I don't mind asking you for money. We do good work here and we do it efficiently, and it takes a lot of money to run this place. But, truth be told, I want a lot more than your money. And I think God does too. I want your daily prayers and your desire to learn, grow, and be a real disciple of Jesus. I want your skills and your passions contributing to this place but also to our witness outside these walls. I want your wisdom and experience helping make decisions and running our ministries. I want your time serving the needs of this congregation. I want your concern for creation and your heart for reconciliation. But most of all I want you to commit to being in real community here, with deep relationships and lasting friendship that bind us and mark us, the church, as unlike most of the modern world where relations are fundamentally transactional. Our stewardship theme this year is "walk in love" and we are going to focus as a community on serving and giving and laying down our lives as Jesus taught his followers to do.

Please know that I am not obtuse, oblivious, or unaware of the financial situation of this church. And I am actually rather financially adept for a priest, which I readily admit is a decidedly low bar. But I trust your faithfulness to offer what you feel called to, and even more I trust God's faithfulness. And while there are untold things I don't know about this place after seven weeks, (for instance, I have master keys to this whole precinct but don't know how to turn the lights on and off in the very room) but this I know for sure in the depth of my soul: as churches close every day across this continent, this place will rise or fall based on the quality of our community. The depth, breadth, and persistence of our love is what will determine our importance, longevity, and witness to the outside world. That is where I will put my efforts this year and that is where we will make our stand.

Elsewhere in the gospel Jesus taught us that "by this all people will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another." Not your theological purity, or your doctrinal knowledge, or the fervency of your prayers, not by the beauty of your worship or even the efficacy of your outreach. Those things are all important, mind you, but they are not most important, so says the Son of Man. In a world that is fraying and fractured, the surest sign of Jesus' disciples is a people who genuinely love each other, across difference, through hard times, sacrificially.

There are stewardship packets in the back that you can pick up or they will be mailed out this week. They contain two letters, one from me and one from the elected lay leaders of this parish, and a card where you can make your financial pledge but also express how you'd like to participate in the communal life of this place or what you need from us so that you can start to be involved in ways you find meaningful. There is also an explanation of pledging that makes clear that we also make a pledge to care for you as members of the cathedral church. Sometimes, what you offer is your neediness and it gives us a chance to be the community that God calls us to be. If you find yourself in that place currently or at anytime, reach out and trust that we will care and will carry you. That might be one of those promises like mine to Michael that I would never

make if I knew in advance what it would cost, but I am also sure we will be better for it. Because before we focus on anything else, we will walk in love in a way that marks us unquestionably as Christ's disciples and makes us worthy of that calling. Let us do it in the name of the one who first loved us, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.