

Pastor Jon's October 17, 2021 Sermon

Text: Mark 10:35-45

“Greatness means serving in Jesus Kingdom”

There is a game we used to play in our neighborhood in the winter called “King of the Hill”. One person would start on top of the snow pile and others would climb up and try to knock them off. If you were successful, you would proclaim the title “King of the Hill”. Then others would try to knock you off. The winner of the game would be the person who was king the longest. However, you weren't king very long as others would gang up on you. The game usually ended when someone got hurt.

In our Gospel for today we see a version of king of the hill... and we also see people getting hurt in the process.

In our Gospel, we see how God calls and continues to call flawed characters to fulfill God's mission. Can you relate to this idea of being a flawed character? And yet Jesus continues to call and teach his students what following him means. Jesus demonstrates grace over and over again to his disciples. This is now the third time Jesus predicted his passion to the disciples and they still don't fully get what following him means.

In today's lection, two of the fishermen Jesus called at the beginning of Mark, the Zebedee brothers, James and John, want to separate themselves from the rest of the group. A chapter earlier, they witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain along with Peter. They were in the so-called inner circle and perhaps feeling a little puffed up. They wanted Jesus to blindly do whatever they asked for. Jesus answered a question with a question. What is it you want me to do for you?

They now want the places of honor at the banquet with Jesus... to sit at his right hand and left hand. And not just at meals, they want an elevated status of leadership and recognition in Jesus' movement. They wanted to organize Jesus' ministry like the rest of the world... like the Romans who Lord it over people.

This request caused division in the ranks. When the other 10 disciples heard this, they became angry at James and John. Imagine that, a community where there is anger and division. We know this too well. But Jesus doesn't grant James and John their request to sit at Jesus' right hand and left hand when he comes in his glory. Instead in true Jesus' style, he teaches what his community should look like and what glory is. The reign of Jesus looks much different than the Greco-Roman world around them. In Jesus' kingdom, displays of power and pomp and circumstance are obsolete... and places of honor at a table don't matter.

Instead, the Glory of Jesus will go through the cross. Therefore, God won't only be with us only when things are going well... but in the opposite. God will be deeply present with us in our losses and in our pain and in our despair... in our own suffering. The cup that Jesus will drink and the baptism in which he is baptized into goes to the depths of humanity... to our failures, our times of feeling abandoned, and beaten up. Our Isaiah text lifts up this idea of a suffering servant. Someone who suffers on behalf of others in order to set people free. We call this vicarious suffering. As Christians we read Jesus into this text. Mark says, “⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus gave his life as ransom. A ransom was money paid or object given to purchase the release of someone or something being held captive. Jesus death paid the price set us free from the powers of sin and death.

He demonstrated what it looks like to be servant of all.

In Jesus' community, whoever wishes to be become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all.

It has been a strange time for the church and the world these last two years. A smallish group of people have shared their time and talents with the church to keep us going through the pandemic. I am thankful for everyone who volunteered or served in any way. But I am realizing that we need to cast that net wider.

I heard of a small church that was in decline. Then someone came up with the idea to put on their sign out front they put the words, “We need your help.” A simple ask that drew curious people into the church for worship and they asked, “So you asked for help, how can I help? The church grew substantially as they found places for people to serve.