

Sermon for October 21,2018
Mark 10:35-45
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As with many passages in scripture, our reading from St. Mark's gospel has been thoroughly domesticated. The point of the story, that those who wish to be great in the kingdom must be servants and slaves in this world, has become something of an endorsement for a leadership style, rather than a statement about the difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this earth.

Indeed, today it would appear that every important person and business is dedicated to nothing so much as being a humble servant. Aetna isn't selling insurance because they want to make money; heaven forbid! Aetna is selling insurance because they want to serve the people who need protection from the inevitable travails of life. Wells Fargo is particularly amusing in this regard. After getting caught absolutely red handed in a scam that cost their customers who knows how many millions of dollars, we are now seeing an advertising blitz declaring that the good people of that bank have no goal in mind other than to serve their customers. They even have this wonderful commercial now that hearkens back to the 1906 earthquake, when Wells Fargo bank, knowing that their customers needed cash in the aftermath of the disaster, was willing to allow withdrawals from accounts they had no access to simply on the strength of the customer's word.

I don't know of a major business anywhere that claims their first goal is to make money; the first goal is always to be a servant of the public. In politics the same is true; nearly everyone running for any office, from fourth grade hall monitor to president of the United States, is quite

clear that they are not running because they want power, prestige, and in some cases lots of money, but because they want to serve the public by implementing needed reforms. Of course in the church the same thing obtains. I never once said to a search committee that I wanted a new job that paid better than the one I had, and this one looks pretty good. Inevitably I talked about how I would serve the people of the congregation I wished to lead.

Not all of this is hokum. Good leaders have the interests and needs of their constituents in mind, and want to do something for them. Part of this is motivated by the desire to be reelected, or to maintain the business, but I am not completely cynical; I also believe that part of this talk about service is genuine. The concept of “servant leadership” in both business and civic life is real. I subscribe to the concept myself and attempted, often poorly, to embody that it both in my career and my family life. The one thing in common all best leaders I have ever known personally had was a clear desire to serve the people they were entrusted to lead. Yes they wanted the job, yes they enjoyed the prestige and the power, but also yes, they cared about those who gave them that power and that prestige.

In this vein, I have heard a number of sermons equating “servant leadership” with today’s passage from Mark’s gospel. The meaning of the passage in this understanding is that if you really want to be a good “Christian” leader, then you must imitate Jesus and dedicate yourself to being a servant of those who have called you forward. After all, we come not to “be served, but to serve.” Beautiful. It is a good idea and the world would do well to practice this concept more, rather than less, but contrary to many well meaning statements from preachers trying to instruct their congregations in becoming more faithful, and I am among the group that has offered such

statements in the context of today's passage, this whole idea has nothing whatsoever to do with what is going on here in this reading.

In this passage Mark is not offering us a strategy for getting ahead in this world, nor is he telling us what sort attitude good Christian rulers take, laudable as such an attitude may be. He is offering us a stark contrast between the way things are among the kingdoms of this world, and the way things are in the heart of God. When he says "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" he is not saying "start in the mail room and work your way up." He is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven, as it is manifested in this world right now, is seen more clearly in the powerless than in the powerful. It is realized more fully in the servants and slaves, than in the people who control the temporal fate of nations. This passage tells us that we don't see the way God works in this world through the President of the United States, regardless of whether that president is Barack Obama or Donald Trump. This passage tells us that we see the way God works in this world through the person who cleans the president's bathrooms. As with last week's passage about how impossible it is for the wealthy to get into kingdom, so this week, Mark is driving as big a wedge as he possibly can between what we want *from* this world, and what God desires *for* this world.

I can only guess as to why this is so. I suspect it has a lot to do with the inherent self-interest of people. It isn't that we don't want to think of others, in fact we think of others all the time. It is rather that with rare and wonderful exceptions, we think of ourselves first. Taking care of me is more important to me than taking care of you. Was I supposed to say that? Oops if I wasn't. Serving my own needs, even if all I am doing is helping myself feel good by volunteering for something helpful, is in the end more important for nearly all of us than true

selflessness. I am not suggesting this is bad, I don't believe it is. We wouldn't be serving 5,000 meals a month through Family Kitchen if it weren't for the self-interest of people who want to help others by helping themselves. But the fact of this deeply ingrained aspect of human personality, makes it impossible for us to use power in the way God in Christ uses it. Therefore the less power we have, the less prestige in this world we have, the more open we can be to see the life of God manifested here and now. As I say, that is a guess, but it is the best guess I have for now. Many of you here today will have a better and deeper understanding of why scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, constantly speaks in these terms about the contrast between the life of God and the life of human society.

Beyond this, everything around us makes it clear that between being great in the Heart of God and being great in the kingdoms of this world, nearly all of us would far prefer being great in the kingdoms of this world. We want the money, the prestige, the security those things bring, and we don't want to be powerless in the terms the way this world understands power. Moreover, this isn't just about us, it is about our chosen leaders. We would not tolerate a president who refused to use the power of that office. One of the biggest knocks on Obama was that he wasn't tough enough on Assad in Syria. We would not accept representatives whose vision of the world was so expansive that they were willing to say, for example, that what we want here in the second district just isn't as important as the needs of people in Appalachia. We demand that people with power use it for our benefit, even as we use our own power for our benefit. Again, I am not saying this is bad. Although great evils emerge from such motives, so to does great good.

At the level of life as we live it today, God's embrace of powerlessness as summarized in our lesson, and more profoundly as seen in the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, is incomprehensible to the vast majority of people, including the vast majority of Christians, who want to be faithful, but without knowing what they are doing turn the powerlessness of Jesus into a strategy to become powerful as this world understands power. It has been going on for 2,000 years.

If therefore we are to learn anything from this passage we must see it not as a strategy, but as a description of the difference between two realms, both of which are alive and active in this world right now. Look at this passage as a critique of the human need to find its purpose and meaning in temporal power and prestige - however modest - rather than in the unfathomable love of God. And then, facing the truth about the difference between God and us, don't give up. Refuse to resort to the protection of making the powerlessness of Jesus a strategy for becoming powerful, and refuse as well to despair of the whole human race. We can't redeem ourselves, but we can notice the difference between the two realms, and put our trust in the powerlessness of this incomprehensible God, rather than in the power we see all around us.