

TOGETHER WE CAN  
2. "Who Wants to be First"  
Mark 10:35-45  
October 18, 2015  
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Today is the second sermon in our three part Stewardship series, "Together We Can." Last week we talked about "Our Greatest Need." I said it wasn't to give more money but that would be nice. Our greatest need centers around unity and community. When we work at and do community in the right way ... looking out for others, building something sustainable for our children, etc. It is about many people doing a few things instead of a few people doing many things. That is how community works and helps in any organization. We have learned that lesson around here and I am happy that we have many people involved in a multitude of service.

Next week in our series we will talk about "A Word about the Collection." The text is from 1 Corinthians 16 where Paul is speaking to the people in the Corinthian church about many things and ends in the final chapter by say, "And now a word about the collection..." He suggests a systematic way for the people to put money aside for the church collection. Today we move to the question, "Who Wants to be First?"

This is an amazing story in the tenth chapter of Mark. It is amazing because it is included in the first place. After all it does not show James and John, two of the closest friends of Jesus in a very good light. Secondly, it is amazing because it describes for us in a quick nutshell the problems of the culture versus the church. James and John are two good Jewish boys. They were raised in a family that went to synagogue every Friday night, lit the Sabbath candle at the dinner table and prayed for the coming of God's anointed.

They expected God to work his purpose out someday. Now, they had been called to be disciples of Jesus. And after following him for a few months had come to recognize Jesus as Messiah material. So, in good worldly fashion, they wanted to know where their places would be in Jesus' kingdom? They wanted a place near the front, thank you. Maybe not in the front pews of the church but we do want to be near Jesus in his kingdom. After all, don't you think we should get some reward? We put up with all of this church stuff on Sunday, getting ready and getting the children ready and then looking for a parking spot and trying to wedge your car in place before the Methodist person does. We should get a reward by being close to the front in Jesus' kingdom.

James and John wanted to know just where they stood with Jesus. Now remember who these boys were. They are the sons of Zebedee and their mother was Salome. In John's gospel she is called the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. That means if you are listening and keeping up, these boys, James and John, are full cousins of Jesus. This is a family matter, no wonder they are so brazen in asking this question of our Lord, they're cousins.

The story also shows us how completely James and John misunderstood the message of Jesus. Many have suffered from this misunderstanding. We misunderstand when we think that Jesus is on our side just because it is our side. The TV evangelist from the 1980's misunderstood when they accepted that the medium was the message and that they could do anything as long as the money kept rolling in and apparently some still believe that if you have seen the recent picture of Joel Osteen standing by his newest jet. People misunderstand today when they think that Jesus is for the Pro-Life movement or the Pro-Choice movement or is voting Republican or Democrat. People misunderstand the Bible when they take a verse or two and make it read the way they want it to read.

During the election of one of the Popes in Rome, a 14 year-old-girl was interviewed on the sidewalk outside the Vatican. A CBS newscaster was roaming up and down the street posing this question, "What would you like to do if you were the Pope?" When he came to this 14 year-old, she replied, "I'd cover the communion wafers with chocolate."

Now as a person who likes chocolate I have to think, "Not a bad idea." But on a more serious level, isn't this precisely the problem? We already have it in the sweet talk leadership we offer the world. We already have it in the sweet tooth discipleship we display in our churches. The wrapper we place around the gospel makes the Bible look like a box of spiritual chocolates. The results can be deadly. There is a book titled, Death by Chocolate and I think it is a fitting title for the effect on the church of our preference not for plain but for chocolate-covered wafers.

Instead of chocolate and all of its tantalizing sweetness we may have to face some sacrificing to follow this Jesus. That is what he is implying to his cousins James and John. Are you willing to drink of the cup of suffering or are you willing to participate in the baptism of the renewal of your whole life? Sacrifice and suffering are not options for discipleship. They are at the very heart of what it means to follow Christ. We talked about suffering last Wednesday night in the Roman's Bible study. Paul reminds us in chapter 8 that the *future* is bright for followers of Jesus. But the *present time* is not so great, we will have to suffer as Christ suffered. If we want to share in Jesus' glory then we also have to share in Jesus' suffering.

But, we live in a world where we do everything possible to get away from suffering and pain. Every time we have a little hurt we run for the pain medicine. I take IBP before I play golf so my back won't hurt.

People are tailoring their religion and customizing their beliefs to meet their needs. Not surprisingly this kind of religion does little to change behavior or attitudes. In its Christian version it is either a form of decaffeinated Christianity—it won't keep you awake at night; no need to fear loss of sleep about our troubled world. Or, it is a form of "Christ-addiction" a word the author Keith Miller used to describe those who seek highs and happiness and follow Christ as long as it suits their needs and purpose. The church needs disciples not Christ-addicts. James and John forgot for a moment who they were. They forgot they had been called by Jesus to be his disciples. They forgot they were to live a life of service after the example of their master. We forget sometimes too, whose we are. We forget that Jesus is still reaching out to us in love. There are times when we grow impatient with a waiter in a restaurant or with a clerk at the grocery store or a student who has come in for advising and hasn't filled out the paperwork and

we show how displeased we are. We forget sometimes that our children were given to us by God, that they are not our possessions but gifts that have been loaned to us for a time and we act overburdened that we have to do such and such for them or we are overbearing in our attitude toward them. At times we forget who we are. Notice that Jesus never forgot who he was.

Jesus doesn't berate James and John. Jesus asked them if they are sure they know what it is they are asking? "Can you drink from the cup that I will drink? Can you be baptized into my baptism?" Can they and we make the sacrifices that are necessary in this world? Jesus could have pleased a lot of people. He could have told the authorities what they wanted to hear. He could have been a huge success. Imagine if Jesus had taken that path. He probably could have been the High Priest at the Temple and had everyone reporting to him. He could have had a fancy place to live and had rich rewards when the people paid him for all the miracles he performed. I wonder, would he have tithed a tenth of it back to God?

But Jesus didn't choose to live that kind of life. He chose the path of perfect sacrifice. He was not disobedient Jesus was obedient. Imagine how lonely that was for him. When the disciples, when his closest friends and kin, James and John, just didn't get it.

It can be lonely for us when we are called to live and sacrifice like our Lord. You get invited to a party where you know there is going to be some questionable activity and you have to turn down the invitation. You get a great job offer but when you were in the final interview you are told that the company has in your opinion some questionable business practices and so you have to decide whether to accept the job offer or not? Or, you finally get the big contract for your company. It's worth millions of dollars but after you sign on the dotted line the contractor tells you he expects a 25% kick-back for giving you his business. It's lonely isn't it trying to do the right thing. Or, It can be lonely when you are sitting in a zoning hearing and a room full of people are shouting that you are about to ruin their way of life by putting a Christian Care facility for older adults in a place where they like to walk and run to their hearts content.

It takes sacrifice friends. Can you drink from the cup that Jesus drinks from? Do you want to be baptized in his kind of baptism? This congregation tries to be faithful. We attempt to be involved in community mission projects that make a difference. We offer a quality education program for 2, 3, and 4 year olds and provide scholarships for those who can't afford it. We invite children to come here on Wednesday afternoons to be tutored by volunteers from this congregation. We attempt to model in our youth programs and adult programs the kind of morals that will give children a good start in life and remind adults who they are as responsible citizens and Christians.

So do you want to be number 1 in life? I think all of us have a little bit of Zebedee's DNA in our genes. Remember the last time you thought you were number 1 or knew someone who was number 1? At football games lots of people hold up those large foam hands with the index finger declaring "We're Number One!" In important games both sides declare they are number 1 or if a team with a losing record wins an important game they declare "We're Number One!" I have known quite a few students who were number 1 in their high school graduating class. Some took every AP course they could and took their chances that they would ace them all. Others took a few AP courses in things they liked and then filled in the rest of their schedule with easy courses

they knew they could ace. Students from both paths earned the number 1 spot in high school. There are lots of ways to get to the number 1 position in life.

No one has ever asked me if they could be the number 1 giver to stewardship in church. You know, the Number 1 Giver! You could be the first, how much would it take Reverend? Back in my home church in Eighty-Four, PA when I was growing up I remember one year when giving to the church was not going well. One man stood up in a Congregational Meeting and said, "Let's post up on a board what people pledge to the church. I'll go first and the rest can follow. I think that will help in people giving more." He was booed down.

Giving is another of those sacrifices we make isn't it? We want to do more I know you do. But then living and life gets in the way. There are always other things that won't wait. The bill collector won't wait, the mortgage company won't wait, the utilities won't wait, the ... well you know what I mean. Jesus will wait right. Jesus is always standing there waiting on us, the William Holman Hunt picture in Sunday school of Jesus standing there knocking on the door (maybe our heart door) waiting for someone to answer. "Patient Jesus," we say. Remember the man who had many possessions who was quizzing Jesus on how to get "eternal life?" Jesus looked at the man and had compassion and loved him and said, "Go, sell, Come back and follow me." And the man turned and walked away because why? Because he had much. How long do you think patient Jesus stood there waiting for him to come back? A week, a day, an hour, fifteen minutes?

Not long, Jesus moved on. The story is in the same chapter in Mark as our lesson this morning, Jesus moved on. James and John, sons of Zebedee, asked Jesus if they could have the choice seats when he came into his kingdom. We have some of Zebedee's DNA in our genes.

To those of us who know we are not perfect and know that we are sinners, we cry out for a savior. His name is Jesus. He comes to us whether we finish first or last. Whether we acquire the good things available in our affluent society or not. He comes to tell us that we do not have to finish first in our spiritual sprint. He comes to tell us that it is by doing justice, and loving mercy and walking humbly with God that we shall obtain a peace and power which nothing or nobody can ever mar. James and John wanted to be number 1 in the kingdom of God. Jesus bid them and us to pick up the cross each day and follow him in obedience to his call to love others as our brothers and sisters. The choice of whether we will follow our own desires to be number 1 or follow him who is already number 1 in the life of servanthood is ours to make. It is our choice to make. I hope we choose wisely!