

October 20, 2024
Pentecost 21
St. Stephen
Mark 10:35-45

In 1980, Mac Davis (for you younger than I, he was a singer!) was headlining in a nightclub. He arrived a couple days early, and he was put up in what was called the “Star Suite.” When he woke up alone at eight in the morning, he was somewhat depressed. So, he did what he always did to cheer himself up, he picked up his guitar and wrote a song. He said it explained how it feels to be all alone at the top of the hill. So, for all of you my age and older, here is your ear worm for the day.

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
'Cause I get better lookin' each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a hell of a man
Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
But I'm doin' the best that I can!

Years later, during the reality tv show, “Dance Moms” a young dancer, who seemed to well up with tears every few minutes, cried out in exasperation, “I am just so humble, and they all wish they could be me.”

It is within our human nature to strive to be at the top of the heap, the front of the line, the winner's circle. When I taught Fifth Grade, everyone in my class seemed to want to be line leader. Everywhere we turn, there are opportunities for competition, and the chance at winning something. Athletes turn to extreme (and sometimes illegal) measures to boost their chances of beating out their competitors. In the workplace, it is all about advancement, and whatever it takes to get there. The search for power and control infiltrates all aspects of our lives, so much so that we at times become blind to its impact. As we feel increasingly powerless in our various situations, we grasp at every opportunity for more power; as we lose control over our own lives, we seek to control others.

The disciples are struggling with much the same issues. They have just heard for the third time of Jesus' impending passion and resurrection. But they cannot wrap their heads around the idea of Jesus, as Messiah, suffering and dying. A Messiah shouldn't suffer. A Messiah should reign in glory, as a great king – not be scourged. A Messiah should be held in great honor – not denied and ignored. A Messiah should wield great power – not be hanging around with the powerless and “losers.” Jesus – suffering and dying? Say it ain't so!

The disciples still think that Jesus, if he is indeed the Messiah, is headed down the glory trail. And James and John want a piece of the action. Their relationship with Jesus gave them a sense of entitlement, after all they were best buds. They felt their closeness to God gave them special entrée. And so, they came to Jesus and asked, without even realizing what they were saying, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but if one of my students had come up to me with this request, I might not have been as amenable as Jesus was. In fact, I would probably respond with a “Really, anything you ask, I am going to do for you?? Really????” It sounds like something from the Bored Teachers Facebook page. Instead Jesus responds, “What is it you want me to do for you?” He actually wants to hear their request. And then it comes. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory.” Now, if there was a Facebook post on “Stupid Disciple Tricks,” this would be one of the best. First of all, they are presuming that Jesus’ presence on earth, and the claim that he was the Messiah, would bring about a political power shift and an end to the longstanding persecution of the Jews. Second, they thought that great honor and glory was in store in the

future. They thought they could use their relationship with Jesus to secure their place in heaven. Unfortunately, they had no clue as to what they were asking.

Jesus' response was to inform them of just that: "You do not know what you are asking." He tells them that "The cup that I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." James and John were probably pretty pleased about this at first. They think they will be given what they desire – fame and glory and a piece of heavenly real estate. But what comes next must be quite a blow, for they are soon to realize that instead of the cup of glory, they will instead taste of the cup of suffering. Instead of career advancement and upward mobility in discipleship, they are about to learn that Jesus' example of reaching out to the disenfranchised in the world is a model for their ministry.

Henri Nouwen writes, "The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which the world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross . . . It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest." Oh, but Lord, it's hard to be humble!

Both the lesson from Isaiah and the Gospel lesson propose that suffering is a part of the experience of discipleship. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” The Christian is called to serve, not to be served. The Christian is called to follow, and even to suffer for the sake of the gospel. After all, Jesus suffered and died so that all might live.

My very best friend in High School was “born again” during the “Jesus Movement” of the late 60s/early 70s. For a while, she was “high” on Jesus. All was wonderful. She strived to be the “perfect” disciple. For her, those who were “down” were just not faithful enough. As I suffered through hip surgeries, she greeted me with, “Smile, God loves you” stickers and prayers for my increased faith. Eventually, she went to work for a lawyer, and her rose-colored glasses began to dim. She realized that not everything was wonderful in our world – that people were in pain, that people lied and cheated, that people who proclaimed everlasting love for one another could, in only a few years, despise one another. She saw the sinfulness of humankind. With her “faith” based on a concept of “entitlement” of

good and happy times, and striving for perfection, she soon proclaimed an abandonment of her beliefs.

We are called to drink the cup that Jesus drinks. This cup – the cup of the new covenant, the cup of salvation, is not a child’s sippy cup! It is a cup that requires sacrifice. It is a cup that even Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, asked to have removed from him. It is a cup that could just as easily be filled with vinegar as with fine wine. It is not a magic potion cup that will make everything right; it is not a magic lamp that grants us wishes. It is, however, a cup of the new covenant – a cup in which God’s grace is poured out on us for the forgiveness of our sins. It is a cup that empowers us as we seek to serve others, that comforts us in our suffering, that provides all that we need to minister in the name of Christ. When we drink from this cup, we are filled with God’s grace, and we become servants to God’s realm.

The same is true of the baptism that we all share. When we are baptized, whether as a child or an adult, we are not simply sticking our toe in the water to check it out! Baptism is not a magical trick to keep one from harm. Yet, as a hospital chaplain, I was often called to baptize infants in critical condition as though it were some kind of

insurance plan. Our baptism liturgy proclaims death and new life in the waters of baptism. Nowhere does it say that everything will be hunky dory in the future. Parents promise to raise the child in the faith; the faith community promises to support the parents and child, and all proclaim the faith that God's love will prevail. God's promise is forgiveness of sins, not elimination of them. God's promise is eternal life, not eternal fame and fortune. Baptism does not eliminate suffering, but it does promise us God's continual love and grace as we suffer, and as we serve those who suffer.

Sharron Blezard writes, "We are not much on suffering these days; our lives are pretty easy in North America. We, as the prophet says, ' . . . like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.' We can switch our television channels and turn our needs to the pain and suffering of our neighbors. We can send money to support missionaries without risking disease or danger and without ever leaving our homes. We try to make life as convenient and easy as possible, and we do everything possible to spare our children hardship and suffering."

Though we avoid suffering like the Plague, Jesus invites us to suffer as part of faithful discipleship. How can we minister in his

name, the one who suffered the ultimate – an excruciating death- for us, if we are not willing to suffer as well? How can we truly understand the sacrifice made by Jesus if we cannot make sacrifices as well? Jesus' ministry is a sacrificial ministry. But, oh Lord, it's hard to be humble.

Michael Coffey , in his poem "Do For Us Whatever We Ask," based on today's scripture shares these words:

Good Lord, whatever you do, don't give us what we want,
give us what we need. Give us your last place loser crown
your humility of embodied love, your humble, open, crucified arms

Give to us aging boys and girls hearts and minds and souls
of men and women who know their lives have meaning
when we give them away losing as beautifully as you

May we look to Jesus, the Christ, who humbled himself even unto the cross, in order to save us from our yearning for perfection, and instead teach us to humbly take our place as servant – least among the greatest, to the glory of God. Amen