

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Mark 10:35-45, 10/17/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

When I hear this morning's Gospel, I hear the view of my seminary New Testament professor, Dr. John Yieh. Dr. Yieh made us memorize key verses for each New Testament book, and today's Gospel contains what he described as the key verse of Mark: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

But that's where today's reading ends up. We have to get there, and to do so, we hear James and John, the sons of Zebedee, telling Jesus what they want: they want to sit on either side of him in his glory.

We get the verb "want" three times in today's passage, and we hear it often in the previous passages in Mark's gospel. Last week I encouraged you to think about what you value. This morning, our reading encourages us not only to think about what we want, but to try to move toward what Jesus wants for us. Which is not sitting by him in his glory in the hope that some fame and importance will be reflected back on us.

When the other ten disciples heard what James and John wanted, "they began to be angry." Their brothers wanted to be more important than the rest of them. Jesus called them over because he recognized a desire in all twelve of them: to be in charge.

I suffer from this desire. On our St. David's website we have a cardboard testimony video that we made four years ago. If you have not seen this video, I encourage you to check it out. It's currently under the tab "Who We Are."

In a cardboard testimony video, people hold up bit pieces of posterboard with something on one side, usually something along the lines of how something started, and then they flip it to the other side to something that says where things ended up. For St. David's video, we asked participants to put down what drew them here, or what was going on for them when they started coming, and how the church transformed them.

I held up a posterboard that said on the first side, "Wanted to be IN CHARGE." I capitalized and underlined IN CHARGE. When Gary first saw the video, he expressed surprise by my honesty in admitting that. Before St. David's, I was an associate rector at a wealthy church with nice people and a nice and very, very hardworking rector. He had a lot of great ideas, but sometimes I had to carry out a vision that was different than what I would have chosen. I felt like I didn't have control over my schedule, or various services and assignments.

I wanted to be In Charge.

The other side of my cardboard testimony reads, "Found partners in ministry." I wanted to be In Charge but came to a church with strong lay leaders, where other people were already in charge of things and knew more than I did. More than ten years later I am still happy when I walk through the glass doors and over the Celtic knot. When I walk the labyrinth thank God for letting me serve, not for being "in charge." I serve St. David's alongside my partners in ministry. Together we try to discern where the Spirit is leading us, because we aren't really in charge. We are serving. We are stewards.

Jesus told his disciples that whoever wishes to become great must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. Last Sunday we heard something similar when Jesus said many who are first will be last and the last will be first. This makes me laugh sometimes when people, especially clergy, are trying to line up for a procession. The more important people go last, not first, so everyone falls all over each other to be last. So then “No, after you” doesn’t happen because they are being humble but because they want to be last now and then first later. Maybe they will even get to sit by Jesus.

But today’s reading would suggest not. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

Last Sunday in my sermon I told you how I miss our meals together, even though when I first came, I thought you all were crazy because you spent more time on dinner than on worship during Lent, and that’s not how we did it at my last church. But at dinner, we are all just partners in ministry. One person isn’t standing up here preaching at the rest of you.

What I miss even more than dinner, though, is washing the dishes. I hated washing dishes growing up. I always had to be on the clean-up team, because I was the youngest and didn’t get to help make the meal. But while I never found washing and drying and putting away dishes to be fun, I enjoyed how people talked about stuff they might not otherwise have talked about while hanging out in the kitchen. Like I said, I was the youngest kid, and I learned all kinds of stuff washing dishes with my siblings and stepsiblings. And here, the people who stick around to wash dishes are people you want to hang out with. If you’ve never tried it, trust me, and as soon as we are having our potlucks and meals again, stick around to do the dishes.

Some of you might think this is heretical, but: I don’t think our desires are necessarily bad. They are like feelings, I think: they just are. They are neutral. But we can try to steer our desires toward what God wants for us.

What do you want, and what does God want for you?

In the Gospel of Mark, a mere four chapters after the one we heard, on the night Jesus was arrested, he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. He told Peter and James and John that he was deeply grieved. He prayed, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

We can see there that Jesus didn’t *want* to suffer. He desired to be spared. But he was going to do whatever God willed.

What do you want, and what does God want for you?