

Servant Hearts  
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Mark 10:35-45

I have a brother who is two years younger than me. We haven't always gotten along. My parents like to say that Chris and I loved each other, but we didn't like each other very much when we were kids. Growing up, we fought over many things, including (for reasons unknown to me) where we would sit in the car. Now back in those days, we didn't have car seats, so we could sit wherever we liked. For some reason now lost in the mists of time, we both always wanted to sit behind my mother. If my grandparents were visiting, then we wanted to sit behind my Grandmother. I have no recollection of what benefit we gained by sitting behind a particular person, but I think it happened just about every time we got in the car. It must have been very annoying to my parents and possibly hurtful to the less popular parent. I'm guessing that sitting behind the chosen person made each of us feel like we had some advantage over the other. We must have felt special.

The sons of Zebedee are grown men and aren't arguing like children with each other over who is going to sit next to Jesus. Instead they have banded together and have decided that it's fair for each one of them to sit on either side of Jesus when he comes into his glory. In a way, though, they are lording it over the other disciples, and for that matter all the rest of humanity including Old Testament heroes like Moses or Elijah or King David. Imagine having the audacity to go up to the Son of God and tell him you want to sit at his right hand once he's in power. Whether they understood that to be in this world or the next, still, it's pretty brazen.

What makes their request even more astonishing and even somewhat absurd is that it comes right after Jesus has told them about his death. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus tells them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him and after three days he will rise again.” Oh, okay, Jesus. Well in that case, can we have the most important places by your side when you come into your glory?

Jesus is so patient with them. “You do not know what you’re asking,” he says. Three times Jesus has told them that he’s going to die in a horribly painful way. Three times the disciples have received the news badly. The first time they are on their way to Ceasarea Phillipi and Jesus asks them who he is. Good question, right? It’s not like they’ve read Mark’s Gospel and know how the story’s going to come out. When Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, then Jesus explains that he will have to die and be raised again. Peter immediately rebukes him for saying this – no suffering and death for his Messiah! – only to have Jesus reply harshly, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus says death; Peter rejects it. Jesus instructs him to focus on divine things, not human ones.

The second time Jesus tries to teach his disciples about what is going to happen to him, they are in Galilee. This time we are told that the disciples did not understand him and were afraid to ask what he meant. That’s a pretty understandable response from our point of view.

But the very next thing we learn is that after that conversation they spend their time on the road arguing about who was the greatest among them. Jesus talks about death. They worry about jockeying for position. Jesus tells them that whoever would be first must be last of all and servant of all.

And today we have the third time Jesus is instructing them about his death. Now they are on their way to Jerusalem where all these events are to take place. What is their response this time? Two of them ask for places of honor with Jesus, and the other disciples get mad at them for asking. Sometimes I feel bad for Jesus. Were these disciples really the best he could do? But Jesus doesn't get mad at them. At least not this time. He doesn't grant their request; but he again instructs them about what life with him is really like. It's not about power and privilege. Those are the things of this world. Among the disciples of Jesus, serving others is what's important.

Whenever I read about Jesus' conversations with his disciples or with anyone he's teaching, I try to imagine myself in their shoes. Although it's easy to mock the disciples and marvel at how they so frequently don't get it, I doubt that I would do any better. We know the story. We have four Gospels telling us the story. And we still find it difficult to understand and follow what Jesus says. I too would have a hard time hearing about the suffering and death of my friend and teacher. I too would want to tell Jesus that there had to be another way. I too might fall into the trap of worrying about the things of this world instead of understanding the new kingdom that Jesus ushers in.

For Jesus what matters isn't position or honor or glory. For Jesus it's not about titles or power or privilege. For Jesus it isn't about where you sit; it's about whom you serve. When I think about serving, I try to make serving about achieving. I need to do more for more people. I need to be the best servant possible. But there I am, still caught up in "this world" thinking. The kingdom of God simply isn't about achievement. It's not about getting more done, whether it be work, or service, or good deeds. It's not about gathering more stuff, whether it be money or possessions or rewards. It's not about becoming special or important. It certainly isn't about having advantages over others. It's about following Jesus' example of service, finding the ways we can serve others in our daily lives.

In this world power, prestige and possessions mark success. Jesus calls us to a different way. He asks us to live with a servant's heart, giving to others with no thought of reward for ourselves. His way is not easy. It's hard to think about serving others when the world calls us to look out for number one. It's hard to keep our mind focused on divine things when earthly things clamor for our attention. It's hard to be a servant when we're just struggling to handle all the things that life in this world throws at us.

I see servant hearts every day here at Hickory Neck: people who pull weeds, rake leaves, pick up sticks. People who teach children, bring a bag of groceries for FISH, knit a prayer shawl. People who unstop toilets, arrange and rearrange furniture, make decisions on behalf of our community. I see people here serving each other every day in large ways and small. They aren't asking for rewards or even for thanks. They aren't seeking greatness. They're following the way of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve.

May we all be strengthened for our service as we gather each week at this table to drink from the cup that has been given to us.