

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
October 20, 2024
St. Mark's, Milwaukee
The Rev. Mary S. Trainor

Text: Heb 5:1-10, Mark 10: 35-45

The camping season is now over. My husband and I have camped for a total of three months this year, visiting state and national parks from Alabama to Arizona, from Michigan to Montana. It has been an incredible privilege to be on a journey to wild, interesting places; thousands of miles and many unforeseen bumps along the way. We were on a journey seeking peace in the beauty of nature.

Today's Gospel is about a journey too, a physical and spiritual journey with Jesus. In it we encounter two apostles, James and John, brothers who were nicknamed "sons of thunder" because of their strong personalities. They asked Jesus a favor as they walked together toward Jerusalem. They said, "***Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.***" They wanted to get ahead of the other disciples and be right next to Jesus in glory. They figured that, after all, they had given up everything to follow Jesus and had been learning from Him for a while, so it was their time to be recognized with a higher status. Was this part of what Jesus had been teaching them? No. It wasn't. Jesus was all about love, giving, humility, service, patience, kindness. Instead of these virtues, James and John were focused on status at this point in their lives—they wanted to stand out among the twelve.

I confess, I do understand James and John wanting to occupy a special place compared to others. I understand because I am the fourth of five children, in a family with high expectations of each of us: *Freddy, Brucie, Elo, Mary, June*. My parents would rattle off our five names fast – as one long word, with no punctuation, no individuation. I grew up near here in Shorewood, smushed in the middle of my amazing siblings (now spread all over the country, doing wonderful things). It was difficult to distinguish myself from the other four. As a child, I recall road trips in which I threw a fit just to get some attention in the crowded station wagon. I recall once bragging to my parents about my good grades just to get a leg up on one of my siblings. Maybe you can relate from a context in your life, with family, friends, work or sports. Maybe you have had a work colleague elbow you out of the way to get to the top. Maybe you've felt betrayed by a friend you had trusted, who broke a confidence to get ahead. We all understand the competitive nature of James and John in today's Gospel, for we are in a culture that reinforces people who are good competitors, who strive to get ahead of the pack.

This Gospel tells us that being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean that we have it all figured out, that we understand everything Jesus is teaching. Jesus said to James and John, "***You don't know what you are asking.***" It is a difficult journey following Jesus, for them back then and for us today and Jesus loves us along the way no matter what. In this story, James and John set out from a place of pride instead of humility. They did not understand yet about how much they needed Jesus. Jesus was gentle in his trying to help them understand that the payoff for following him included things like perfect love, unearned grace, eternal life, forgiveness, hope---the payoff didn't include getting a place of high status. Our journey of faith begins from a humble place,

where we recognize our need for God. Theologian Henri Nouwen put it this way, "**When we are honest with ourselves about our wounded condition, then we can begin a journey toward wholeness in Christ.**"

The greatest person in God's eyes is a person who has a heart of humble service towards God and others. Jesus said about himself in this Gospel, "***The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***" We become "first" to Jesus not by competition or ambition, but through service, through sharing God's love with each other. James and John eventually came to understand what Jesus was communicating here, and they faithfully followed Jesus, sharing his message of love and hope. Their journeys were not easy. James was the first apostle to be martyred, and John lived out his life in exile, caring for Jesus' mother after the crucifixion.

As we journey through all the environments we are in (home, work, community, online and offline) Jesus is right with us as our guide, our redeemer, our savior, our friend. If we let Him. No matter how many times we mess up (*like: putting ourselves first, getting our priorities wrong, having the wrong attitude, doing the wrong thing*), Jesus doesn't ever consider throwing us out. He never says, "I've had enough of you. I'm fed up with your behavior." Jesus never rejects us. Jesus always loves us and accepts us along the way. It's a learning process.

Author and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr said, "**Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change.**" And, nowhere was that lived out more than in the life of the 13th C saint Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we just celebrated earlier this month. Francis began his life as an arrogant selfish rich guy, and when he recognized how much God loved him, his life was transformed and he began a life of service. His life shows how he lived out Jesus' teachings and he inspires us to make the world a better place not through ambition, but by love and humble service.

To close this sermon time here are some excerpts from the prayer of St. Francis (which you can find in the Book of Common Prayer, prayer # 62, page 833):

**Lord make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred let us sow love.... Grant that we may not seek so much to be consoled as to console...
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love
For it is in giving that we receive**

Amen.