

“Servant Song”

In elementary school one of the best parts of the school day was what we called recess. That was the time that we got to go out and play in the schoolyard. Often we played on the swings, jungle gym, or games like tag. Then there were times when we played team games. Part of team games was choosing up sides. There were many ways to do this, but most often the teacher would designate two captains then those captains went through the ritual of pick kids to be on their team. It was best to be picked first or second, it was absolutely humiliating to be picked last. Being picked last meant you were unwanted and unvalued. You were only picked because everyone had to be on a team.

In today’s reading James and John the sons of Zebedee have coopted the system. They have gone to Jesus to arrange the first two picks. It is a move that upsets the rest of the disciples who also want a place of favor. Even after Jesus tells James and John that he cannot grant their desire the other disciples are put out. It is an odd situation.

It is even odder for the fact that Jesus has just finished telling the disciples for the third time that his ending will not be glorious and triumphant, but that he will end up crucified by the Romans. The disciples despite Jesus’ multiple attempts to explain to them what his Messiahship will be like do not comprehend or perhaps cannot comprehend. Perhaps they think he is testing them to see who will hang on after his dire predictions. Perhaps it is just too hard to understand the concept of a Messiah who gives his life for all, rather than one who conquers. We do not know what is going through the disciple’s minds, but whatever it is they are not grasping what Jesus is telling them.

It is also strange for James and John to ask to be on Jesus’ right and left in his glory, because we who know the entire story are aware that the ones on Jesus’ right and left in his crucifixion are going to be two criminals. The criminals in Mark and both antagonistic and berate Jesus for his lack of power to save them from crucifixion. To be on Jesus’ right and left is to be scorned and to scorn. Ultimately, these robbers die unrepentant.

While James and John are acting egotistically and the other disciples are acting like a group of jealous children again, Jesus makes this into a teaching moment. He tells them, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”¹ We have been hearing this teaching all of our lives, and as smart and self-effacing as we might be, we have a hard time grasping it. Imagine what it was like for the disciples who had just that moment been arguing over who deserved to be the Jesus’ first picks. I wonder what they were thinking. Were they having a moment of incomprehension? Were they feeling ashamed for acting so foolishly? Were they thinking to themselves, “Here he goes again with his upside down thinking”?

Regardless of their thoughts, upside down thinking is a hallmark of Jesus’ teaching. His parables invite us to ponder a world where the hated Samaritan is the hero or where a father gives a banquet for a son who squandered his inheritance. With stories like these Jesus is trying to shake us up. He is trying to get us to think not just outside of the box, but to get rid of boxes altogether. Instead of putting our lives and the lives of others in neat boxes with labels that explain the contents as well as its healthfulness, he wants us to free those inside and allow them to flourish.

The best way to do that is to serve each other. I think it was Desmond Tutu who said something like, “If we truly believed what we say we believe we would genuflect to each other constantly.”² What

¹ Mark 10:43-44 New Revised Standard Version

² I cannot find a source for this statement, although I have heard it attributed to Tutu.

we say we believe is that God is in each of us. When I used to work with little children I would ask them where Jesus lives. Some would say he lives in heaven, but most of them would say that Jesus lives in our hearts. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to go away from us and leave us abandoned to our own devices. Jesus died to this life in order to be available to each of us in our hearts. That is the ultimate sacrifice of a servant. As he said in John's Gospel, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."³ Let that sink in if you will.

Would you lay down your life for anyone? If so who would that be? I would guess most would say, family, friends, or a child, but few of us are asked to do it. Soldiers in combat might be presented with that decision. Parents in an emergency might give their life for a child. I think there are too few who would lay down their life for a complete stranger. Even fewer would lay down their life for their persecutors. Yet that is what Jesus did.

Jesus told James and John when they asked to be one at Jesus' right and one at Jesus' left that they would have to be willing to drink the cup that he would drink and to be baptized with the baptism that he would be baptized with. James and John said that they could and Jesus assured them that they would suffer that cup and that baptism

Presumably, we are here today not just to be reassured or given solace. We are not here only to be pardoned for our failings. Rather we are here because the Good News of Jesus, part of which is the world turned upside down story that Hannah sang,⁴ and Mary sang,⁵ and Jesus preached is the story we want to be part of and to help bring into being. That is the Kingdom of God on this earth as it is in heaven. A new order that gives rest to the weary, unburdens the heavy hearted, and provides for all out of the bounty of God's creation.

It is not capitalism, socialism, communism, consumerism or any other ism. It is God's Kingdom of love. Until we trade in the isms that the world has sold us for true abundant life in Christ Jesus we are just as dull-witted and egotistical as the disciples.

We are able to be more than those disciples. We are able to be Hannah, Mary, Joshua, Deborah, Daniel, Amos, and others who sought to serve only God and neighbor as was commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures. We have it in us when we get our egos out of the way, see the Christ in each other and seek to serve the Christ who is in the other. As we do so we allow the Christ in me to bow to the Christ that is in you. As we do that our whole world can be turned right side up, God side up, forever.

³ John 15:13 King James Version.

⁴ 1 Samuel 2:1-10

⁵ Luke 1:46-55