

Pick Me!

Message for October 18, 2009

When I read today's scriptures, two examples came to mind...

Friday and Domino: vying for attention

Tigana and Ravenna: sisterhood survival skills (toss from bed, bait and switch with toys); being favorite, being singled out – what this means to dogs and people.

This text from Mark brings out some of the “ugly” in the acts of the disciples – the book of Mark tends to give a more realistic picture of how they acted than the other books.

Some background on Mark from Dallas Theological Seminary professor Dr. Thomas L. Constable's commentary on the Book of Mark, 2008:

likely written by John Mark who traveled with Peter and recorded Peter's actions as a disciple.

Written in Rome before Peter's death, between 63 and 70 AD for Gentiles – transcribed and explained Jewish words and customs to the Gentiles, so they'd better understand and accept Jesus as God's Son and the Messiah.

Emphasized/described a more human Jesus, who suffered as humans would – to help the persecuted early Christians feel inspired to follow Jesus' example of doing God's will.

Mark is probably the first Gospel written – scholars note that much of 90 percent of content in Matthew and 40 percent of what's in Luke are contained in Mark – and the events and content are quite similar...Matthew and Luke are said to have edited Mark's work.

Someday, we should study Mark!

So - Mark, Chapter 10 – a book full of little stories about Jesus and the disciples, on their Journeys... I call them Road Trip Stories.

Pharisees and divorce

Little children and Jesus

The rich man who lived 10 commandments, but couldn't give up his lifestyle to follow Jesus, which led to a discussion about being rich and having faith.

The famous "eye of a needle" quote – easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom.

Peter and the others – speaking about giving up their lives to follow Jesus – and Jesus response that they will receive hundredfold – and the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Which brings us to today's portion of this chapter: Jesus and the disciples are back on the road - Jesus tells them again (the third time!) about what is to come: he will be rejected by his friends, persecuted and die, and return after three days.

James and John, the Zebedee Brothers hear this and say, "Hey, Jesus – we want you to do something for us."

Jesus: "What's that?"

Zebedees: Well, we want to sit on each side of you when you come into your glory." (Right hand seating: highest honor. Left hand seating: second highest. This would put them above the other disciples in Jesus' favor! This would elevate them to greatness).

James and John, in human self-centeredness, were crying, "Pick me! Pick me!"

Stop-right-here-Question: What were they thinking??? Did they have any idea as to what this meant? What was the frame of mind of the disciples at this time? (Were they just being over-confident? Scared to be without him? Wanted to show off?)

Jesus: You don't know what you're saying – do you think you can give up your life like I will? Can you drink from the cup I'm going to drink from? (Cup of death). Do you think you can be baptized for the same reason I was? (Baptism – full submersion under water – implies being weighed down by trouble – baptized to die on a cross) Can really you do that? Are you able to do all that?

Zeb's: Sure – (cocky or what?? Remember our study of James? He was martyred for speaking up for God. And John, “the one Jesus loved” was the last disciple to die – of old age - in Ephesus).

Jesus: Well, all right then – but you need to know that it's not my decision who gets to sit where when I leave you – God decides that. (Brings them down a notch or two).

The others weren't thrilled with this whole discussion – just who did the Zebedees think they were anyhow?? (They wanted to be great, too! “Pick us!”)

Jesus reminded them that among the Gentiles, the rulers and lords were often tyrants (in other words, none of you should look at the others as less than yourselves or better than the others).

His parting shot: OK you guys, if you want to be great, you need to lower yourselves and be servants – slave of all – just like me.

The Son of Man is not to be served – but to serve, and give his life to all.

Dr. Constable interprets that Jesus seemed to understand how the disciples felt when this discussion took place – it's not necessarily bad to want to be great for the Kingdom of God.

But, Jesus wanted them to refocus on **their self-centeredness**: the point is **to be good for God, and not for their own gain or notoriety (to sit on the right hand).**

Jesus made the point that he wasn't asking anything of the disciples that he himself wouldn't do - all this would be happening to him as well – he was here to serve - period.

Constable believes the last verse of our reading for today is absolute focus of Mark's whole gospel: **Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God.**

So what does this roadside conversation mean to us?

Some thoughts:

It's human nature (and dog nature) to want to be recognized for the good you do and what you give to the world – some set out for the recognition, and they get it. Politicians, community leaders, church leaders – most probably have good intentions and mean well (like James and John), but they lost a little of the true meaning of what's required to go walking with Jesus.

It is possible that, like the disciples, we don't want to be left behind either – there's pressure today to hold your own in society – and we are too often compared to one another. Rivalry over small things occurs – can take over our sense of what's right and worthy...cloud our judgment about how to live with everyone else.

It's also possible that the disciples were scared about how they would do God's work once Jesus left for good – and there was a sense of clinging to him, wanting to be included in the "in-crowd" of his after life, so they wouldn't be alone. We can all understand that feeling, too.

But Jesus gently and in a straight-from-the-hip answer brings it all back to a basic truth –

God decides who gets to sit in the place of honor, and, those chosen won't be any of us who think we deserve it – they will be the lowliest of us, those who are served. Those we're supposed to serve...which, by the way, is a different action than helping.

I didn't even consider the fine line between "serving" and "helping" until I read the commentary by Constable.

At the end of his discussion on today's scripture, he included a little list that describes his observations of the difference between *one who serves* and *one who helps*. Listen to this...

Contrasts between a Helper and a Servant

A helper helps others when it is convenient.

A servant serves others even when it is inconvenient.

A helper helps people that he or she likes.

A servant serves even people that he or she dislikes.

A helper helps when he or she enjoys the work.

A servant serves even when he or she dislikes the work...

A helper helps with a view to obtaining personal satisfaction.

A servant serves even when he or she receives no personal satisfaction.

A helper helps with an attitude of assisting another.

A servant serves with an attitude of enabling another.

Which description fits you? Which description fits us as a faith community? Are we helpers or servants?

We probably need to get in the habit of asking ourselves that question whenever we get caught up in the daily patterns of our lives...helping comes more easily, and most of us don't have trouble with that. But servant-hood is another matter...

Being a servant shouldn't mean that we are to become doormats of some type, waiting for others to get the signal that we are givers, and allow them to take advantage of our acts of giving in the world.

I also don't believe God expects us to wear ourselves out and push aside all the other responsibilities of our lives to be "servants."

I think a more God-centered approach to being a servant lies quietly within all we do – **it should be a subtle part of every act of every day.**

Our faith in God, our acceptance of a Spirit that sets our souls on fire, and our response to Jesus – our desire to live and serve like Jesus – should be enfolded in every fiber of who and what we are – it should show the world that we've been "picked."

And God, **first in our hearts and lives, guides our actions, making us “natural servants”** – it is obvious to others in the world that we do care about things differently - and what we do as Christians becomes an extension of our usual routine – **not a special thing we “do.”**

Here’s a little story by pastor and author Mark Buchanan, called, “This is it.” I think it illustrates what I’m trying to share with you today.

A few years ago, a friend assembled a weekend work party to lay sod in his yard. The sun was shining. He had fresh coffee and cinnamon buns. And the crew he'd called together were all good friends. We liked each other immensely.

Then Al said, "Guys, do you realize something? This is it! This is it!" We stopped.

"Al, this is what?"

"This is community."

We all murmured our assent and congratulated one another. Yes. This is it.

But then I said, "Al, this is great, but I don't think this is it. I like you all too much. Add a person or two to this company who lacks social graces, who looks different, who's needy, smelly, and irritating. If we truly loved a person like that, then that would be it."

Silence. Then one of guys said, "Uh, Mark. We've accepted you, haven't we?"

We all laughed, but they granted my point.

We're always tempted to turn the church into a club. With our kind of people. With a strict decorum designed to keep up appearances and keep out the, shall we say, undesirables. But Jesus said it's no credit to us if we love those who love us—our kind of people. We don't need God to love them; natural

affinities are sufficient. But you, Jesus said, are to love the least of these and the worst of these—losers, enemies. That takes God: a supernatural subversion of our own prejudices, and a heaven-borne infusion of God's prodigal love.

I preach that. I try to live that.

A year or so after our sod-laying party, Wanda arrived. Wanda was not our kind of people. She was thirsty alright, for beer, port, rum, vanilla extract, whatever. She had only one way to pay for that. I'll let you guess.

But she was desperate, and thirsty for something else. She called the church one day, wondering if she could see a pastor, and now! Two of us met with her. She told us her troubled story. I told her about the woman at the well whose life, like Wanda's, wasn't going well. But she met Jesus and he offered her living water. I explained what living water was, and asked Wanda if she'd like some.

"Oh yeah!" she said. We prayed. She confessed, repented, surrendered. Drank deep.

The other pastor said, "Now, Wanda, this Sunday will be your first time in church. Don't feel you have to fit in right away. You can sit at the back if you like, come late, leave early. Whatever is comfortable."

Wanda looked at him sideways. "Why would I do that?" she said. "I've been waiting for this all my life."

That Sunday, Wanda was the first to arrive. She sat at the front, and loudly agreed with everything I said. She was the last to leave. The next Sunday, same thing, except she brought a friend, one of her kind of people. I preached on servanthood. My main point: if you've tasted the love of Jesus, you'll want to serve. It was Communion Sunday. In those days, we called our elders The Servant Leadership Team. I asked the Servant Leaders to come and help with Communion. That day only two of our team were in church. They straggled to the front.

All Wanda heard was the word servant. And she had been listening intently to my sermon: if you've tasted the love of Jesus, you'll want to serve.

She walked straight up to serve Communion with the other two "servants."

I flinched.

Then I remembered Luke 7, Jesus' words to Simon the Pharisee as a woman, not unlike Wanda, washed Jesus' feet: "Do you see this woman?"

Do you see her?

I leaned over to Wanda and said, "Since this is your very first time doing this, do you mind if I help?"

So Wanda and I served Communion. The best part was watching the faces of the people I love and serve and pray for and preach to.

Not one flinched. They saw her.

This is it.

In my heart of hearts, I believe we are a faith community that wants to be servants for God, just like Jesus.

We may not give our lives on a wooden cross like Jesus did, (and age and health might limit how much we can do) but I believe many of us, with God in our souls, offer ourselves in quiet service each day – and for the right reasons – as “natural servants.”

I also think we're ready to reach out more openly to the Wandas of these days, and bring them into God's light and love, because **that's what it's all about.**

We're finding that by serving God, those hundred-fold blessings are finding their way to our small piece of this world and our time in it.

I think you'll agree with me that we are truly blessed.

And from what I know of so many of you and your daily gifts of service to this world, I also believe we aren't looking for that place of honor at the table next to Jesus – we're just looking for a place to sit with other stumbling disciples.

We've already been “picked” – and we're learning the difference between being helpers and being natural, God-loving servants.

This is what God wants from us...and what Jesus did.

It's a good place to be...and it's the right attitude...let's continue to walk the road with Jesus together.

Amen.