



Opening Worship Service
Fall 2008 National Church Council - September 11, 2008
ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson

Mark 10.35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

I'm very happy to be here with you all again for these few days of meeting and learning and visioning and worshipping and laughing. I have become very fond of you all and it is like gathering together as an NCC family. Sure we all have our little quirks, but we have learned how to embrace them, even celebrate them and work together in service to God and for the good of our church.

It's funny, we often refer to the church as a family, to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. And we probably do so with both joy and sometimes frustration, knowing that family has both its pluses and minuses. When the church family gathers, as with any family gathering, it is a mixed bag. There is joy at being together with those we care about, especially those we do not get many opportunities to see. There is tension because of past conflicts. And there is a certain amount of competition and sibling rivalry.

Let me share with you an example of this. It happened when my family gathered for the funeral of my grandfather in Camrose, Alberta. One of the tasks we began to undertake was clearing the house - twenty-five years in one house but almost 94 years of accumulations. And my mother and uncle asked the six grandchildren to go through the house and make a list in prioritized order of what we might like to have to use and keep as a remembrance of Grandpa. It felt awkward and a little strange. But the weirdest part was the way that we hid our desires from each other. We made lists and kept the info to ourselves. I jokingly tried to look at my cousin's list, only to have it guarded with an arm, much like test papers in elementary school. It brought out a certain kind of competitiveness.

I think we have all experienced similar situations, and because of this we recognize the tension that exists in today's gospel lesson. The family of the disciples is gathered and there is tension there too. Tension because two of the disciples, James and John, go to Jesus and ask for something for themselves, something that perhaps all of the disciples have thought about, but something that no one has ever dared articulate before. They ask Jesus to sit on his right and left hand side when he comes to glory. In other words, they ask for personal recognition. For status. To be important. To be a somebody.

And this request makes the rest of the disciples furious. And I think we can all understand their anger. They're angry because James and John are trying to get ahead, but mostly because they are doing it in a way that will leave the rest of the disciples behind. And so they are also jealous, and probably a little frustrated that they didn't think to ask Jesus for this recognition and status first.

And I think that this lesson points out one of the biggest temptations we face as humans, to serve self, instead of serving God.

I don't know how many of you watch award shows - I'm kind of an award show grazer - I watch a little and then I get bored. But at the Emmy's several years ago, Jerry Seinfeld came out to give an award and preceded the presentation with some very telling and pointed remarks. He said something along these lines. "We come together today to say to ourselves that, hey, I like me. I've really made it. I'm pretty darn great. And yes, we pay others, publicists and managers and agents to tell us this on a regular basis, but it's good to hear it one more time, said out loud in front of our peers."

And there was a lot of laughter from the audience, but it was the laughter of self-recognition. And I think that we recognize what he is talking about too. We know that we can easily get caught up in self-serving, self-promoting, and self-congratulating.

And we can do this in a variety of places and settings. We can do it in our jobs as we focus on getting ahead instead of on the task at hand. We can do it in our families when we end up using our spouses, our children our parents to serve our own needs. We can do it in our social circles as we spend time with the right people, those who can help to advance our cause, instead of those we enjoy being with. And we can do it in our churches when the kingdoms we seek to build become our own instead of God's.

And lest some of you are sitting there saying this does not apply to me, I live to serve others, I

always put others first before me, I need to point out that this is a double-edged sword. We can also turn being a servant into a kind of competition, seeing how little we can do for ourselves and how much we can do for others. In the end this kind of self-sacrificing can end up being self-serving as well.

And Jesus comes to the disciples and to us in the middle of all of this self-serving and self-promoting and self-congratulating and reminds us that although this is the way of the world, it is NOT the way of the kingdom of God. What we are called to do is to serve God by serving others. And the recognition and the glory and the focus is to be on God and not on ourselves.

Let's take me as an example. Here I am, The Reverend Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop, LWF Council member, Canon of the Diocese of Niagara. And there is a temptation to think that this somehow means that I've arrived. That I'm something pretty special. That I've achieved some kind of recognition and glory. This is a temptation for me, but it is also a temptation for others - to put me on a pedestal, or perhaps more likely to join with the disciples in being resentful and angry that somehow I've gotten ahead.

But over and over again in the Bible we are reminded that we are all members of the same body. No one of us is more important than any other. We are each given different gifts and different tasks to carry out our ministry. And so my ministry is no more important than anyone else. Being a Bishop or a pastor or a national church council member or a doctor or a plumber or a bus driver or a factory worker or a full-time mother are all ways that we are able to serve God and work towards bringing in the kingdom and being in mission for others.

And sometimes it is very depressing, because no matter how hard we try to serve God, we constantly end up reverting back to our human nature and serving ourselves instead. We fail, hopefully not hugely, but we fail. Like those who are members of Alcoholics Anonymous, we realize that we are at best recovering, one day at a time, from the human condition of being self-serving. That's why I talk about how our adoption of the vision to be a church in mission for others is also a confession that for too long we've been a church in mission for ourselves.

But there is hope and there is the promise of help. In the Gospel lesson we see James and John and the rest of the disciples revert to their self-serving human nature and yet they are still called to follow Jesus, they are still called to serve. And this gives us hope, because if God can use these flawed and imperfect people to bring in the kingdom, then God can use us too!

And so we keep trying to serve God. And there is help for us in our serving. And that is part of what these days together is all about. There is help for us in the rest of the body of Christ, in our sisters and brothers who are called to help and encourage us in our serving. And so I can count on you to help and encourage me as I continue in ministry. And you can count on me and on each other for help and encouragement as you continue in your ministry. And there is help because the gifts that we have been given and are called to use come to us from God. And the help we need to use those gifts, and the grace and strength and courage we need, these too come to us from God. And finally the forgiveness we need when we do fail will also come from God.

So when we leave worship this evening and hear those final words, go in peace, serve the Lord, we can joyfully respond, thanks be to God, knowing that the God who has called each one of us to serve, maybe not in the same way, but equally in importance, will help and equip us in our serving.