

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark 10:35-45 (Proper 24)

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.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Sermon

When I was a little boy, my mom, dad, and sisters would drive from Kapahulu to Kahaluu to visit my great grandparents, who we affectionally called Kahaluu Baba and Kahaluu Grandpa.

I remember the long drive over the Pali, looking out the car window at green, green mountains that would rise up to touch the blue, blue sky. I remember the smell of the forest, feeling the dampness of the air, and the sound of birds chirping all around us as we got out of our car and walked to my great grandparent's quonset hut.

I remember hearing the sound of people speaking Japanese, the oohs and aahs of how big we got, and how far the drive was for us, and thanking us for visiting from so far away.

My great grandparents came from Japan to Hawaii to find a better life. They first lived in Waialua, moved to Kakaako, and finally retired in Kahaluu. They worked hard their entire life. Kahaluu Grandpa owned a fishing boat while Kahaluu Baba worked at a little grocery store. Together they raised six children.

What I remember most during those visits to Kahaluu was my great grandmother's cooking—not only the taste, but the way that she would serve my Kahaluu Grandpa.

She would put tasty little morsels of food in many tiny little dishes, and place them in front of Kahaluu Grandpa alongside a bowl of rice, and a bowl of steaming hot miso soup, and just a small bit of sake too. Kahaluu Grandpa lived like a king! You could tell that he thoroughly enjoyed his meal, but what was more amazing was that my Kahaluu Baba was just as happy to serve him. She would not eat with him, but after he was done, she cleaned up as he left the room, and then she would come and serve us, and then when that was done, she finally sat down to her meal.

In my later years I would remember this and I would think to myself, Kahaluu Baba worked so hard to serve him, and at other times I would think, hmm, why doesn't Faye do that for me?

Is that selfish for me to think that?

I can understand where James and John are coming from. In this passage, we see their selfish ambition in all of its ugliness. James and John come to Jesus asking for the top seats in His kingdom. They saw themselves as the leaders among the disciples. Asking for the coveted seats meant three things:

First, they wanted the glory and honor that came with being elevated to the throne.

Second, they wanted to be close to Jesus in the Kingdom.

And third, they wanted to have positions of great authority.

Don't get me wrong. Being ambitious is not a bad thing. Healthy ambition is good. Parents try to instill this at an early age.

“You can do it, just keep trying!”

“With a little more practice, you will be great!”

Ambition motivates us to get up in the morning and want to do our best. And isn't that what we hunger for? Being recognized for our hard work, or just being needed?

We hunger for the goodness of life, to prove our ability, to accomplish great things. We hunger for something we do not have and that hunger drives us to excel, to want more such as a better position,

a better salary, a more loving family, a comfortable home, or a good name and reputation in the community.

But there is a dark side to ambition. It is called greed.

You pursue what you can get for yourself, and the more you get, the greater your need. Greed can grow and spread and infect everything it touches. The more you have, the more you want, and no matter how much you have, it is never quite enough.

We live this everyday. We worry about finishing first, about keeping our job, about making money, and about what others think of us. We can be arrogant. We can be full of pride. We are so caught up in ourselves that we often forget about God.

Jesus responds to James and John by telling them that they have no idea what they are asking for. He confronts them by asking if they are willing and able to endure all that Jesus will soon endure. James and John confidently say they can, but they do not understand what awaits Jesus and how he will suffer on the cross.

As Christians, we are called to submit ourselves totally to the will of God. Maybe good things will come our way, maybe they won't. But we are tasked to submit and follow without seeking a reward.

But we are stubborn and we like to do things our way and our way only. We don't like to be told what to do. We don't like to listen to others who have differing opinions.

Soon the rest of the disciples hear what James and John are up to and they become angry. The nerve of James and John to try to gain Jesus' favor! They were jealous. They were upset that they hadn't had the good idea to ask Jesus first.

But we need to remember that people don't always act like how we think they should. And when they don't, it's easy to become offended with them and allow anger to creep into our hearts.

It's very, very easy to hold grudges. We've all had many. As we know, it's very easy to have hard feelings over things or events that happened five, 10, or even 20 years ago!

What is difficult is seeking forgiveness and forgiving the one you are angry with.

So Jesus deals with his selfish disciples by reminding them that the path to the top leads through the bottom.

If you really want to reach the top you must start out at the bottom. If you really want to be a leader, you must first learn how to serve. If you want to be recognized and respected, you must give up all arrogance and selfishness. We must live our days serving others.

It means being willing to get none of the glory. It means being willing to do the most servile and menial of tasks with no thought of receiving recognition or thanks.

So let's care less about being recognized as long as
God's work is accomplished. Let's see beyond
ourselves and to see the needs of others.

So this coming week, ask yourself, who can I serve?

Then turn around and ask one person, unselfishly, and
with God's love in your heart, how can I help you?

And if all of us help one person, and that person helps
another person, one by one, we can change the world.

Amen