

Sermon, Proper 24 (29), Year B, October 21, 2018, Jane A. Beebe

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him 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?"” (Mark 10:35-36)

In praying this Gospel passage this week, I was most struck by what Jesus says in response to James and John’s seemingly outrageous request. “What is it you want me to do for you?” These are the words Jesus often says to those who come to him for healing. Jesus does not presume to know exactly what it is that needs healing. He allows those who come to him to name what it is, to put it into words. At the same time, I think Jesus sees through us: our denials, our fears, and our lack of self-knowledge. Yet, in asking this question, Jesus shows compassion and patience for our foibles, our transparent attempts to hang onto a false sense of our own dignity.

Last week we heard the story of the rich man who comes to Jesus asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” When Jesus hears of this young man’s devotion to God, he loves him. On the surface it seems so harsh that Jesus tells him that he is lacking one thing. Jesus tells the rich young man to sell everything, give it to the poor, and become Jesus’s disciple. Jesus is inviting him to follow. How wonderful is that? Jesus perceives that the thing that will make this young man whole, that will give him the freedom to live the God-life, is to give everything away. Peter, somewhat wistfully says, “Look, we have left everything and

followed you.” Jesus then tells the disciples they will receive a hundredfold for what they have left behind—whatever it is—and “in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Mark 10:30-31)

James and John seem to have skated right over this idea. They want to know where they are in the picture when Jesus comes into his glory. The disciples take it on the chin from us for those times when they don’t seem to “get it.” Yet isn’t it understandable that the disciples, especially the ones closest to Jesus, would want to know their place in the coming Kingdom, that Kingdom that Jesus proclaims is near at hand? They are members of an oppressed people living in occupied territory. Times are hard. Is it any wonder that they ask they ask? "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (Mark 10:37)

Jesus confronts them with the reality of the path down which he is leading them and says, "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?" (Mark 10:38) However, if Jesus is saying this because “drinking the cup” is what will be most healing for them, what will bring them a wholeness and aliveness that they cannot currently imagine, surely his response is said with as much love as it is with the rich young man. After all, we know that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” Jesus knows the difficulty of what he is

asking. As it says in Hebrews, “He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness...” (Hebrews 5:2)

The glory the disciples envision sharing with Jesus is not what they imagine. In God’s Kingdom the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Those who wish to be great in God’s Kingdom must be servants; those who wish to be first must be “slave of all.” (Mark 10:43) A slave is even less than a servant. A slave has no agency. A slave occupies the lowest place in conventional society. Yet in God’s Kingdom it is a place of freedom, a place of aliveness. Again as it says in Hebrews, “... Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"...” (Hebrews 5:5) Jesus came to share this priesthood with us, to show us that we are beloved children of God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus demonstrates this viscerally by not shying away from a task usually performed by servants or slaves: he washes the disciples’ feet.

When I was in the middle of seminary—when it seemed to be taking forever—I looked for some simple ministry I could do that would help ground me in reality. There is a homeless shelter in Amherst called Craig’s Doors. The shelter is named for Craig Lorraine, a Navy veteran who served in the Gulf War. One particularly cold night he expressed this wish to a staff member at the shelter: “Sometimes I just wish I had a door...a door I can close!” There are UMass

students and church groups who volunteer there on a regular basis at night, helping guests settle in, and preparing and serving an evening meal. I was still working full time, so a late night just wasn't possible for me. I discovered that it is possible to help out in the morning by helping to serve breakfast and washing dishes. I could get out of there by 8 o'clock so it was perfectly doable. I started going there once a week from November to April when the shelter is open. The shelter is located at the Baptist Church in Amherst on the edge of the UMass campus.

As you can imagine, our kitchen equipment was not the very best; the church provided what it could. The coffee urns we had available weren't really up to heavy-duty use. One of them had a particularly unreliable dispenser. Often by the end of the morning we would end up taking the lid off and serving the coffee with a ladle: awkward, but it worked. Having enough hot coffee in shelter is really basic. One morning in February we ran out: pretty depressing. There was another morning I remember, though, that was wonderful. Someone had donated bacon. It is not something I eat very often any more, but I had to admit that the scent was fabulous! We had a sense of abundance that we didn't often enjoy. A UMass volunteer had brought a gallon of hot sauce she had purchased with her own money because she knew the guests liked it.

One morning the inevitable happened. Coffee got spilled all over the floor. I rushed out of the kitchen to attempt to mop it up. One of the guests had already

grabbed a roll of paper towels and started to clean up the floor. I must have seemed taken aback that he pitched in. He explained to me, looking me directly in the eye, that this was his home. That meant he cared very much if his floor was clean and had every intention of taking responsibility for that. That gave me pause. I was the one earnestly trying to be the “servant.” (And it’s not as if I am God’s gift to dishwashing). He served me that day.

Most of you are probably familiar with the hymn *Abide With Me*. The poem on which the hymn is based was written in 1847 by Henry Francis Lyte, a Scottish Anglican. The version in our hymnal does not include this stanza:

“Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,
But as Thou dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,
Familiar, condescending, patient, free.
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.”

Familiar, condescending, patient, free...

The word ‘condescending’ particularly leaps out at me. These days, if we say that someone is condescending, we probably think in pejorative terms: we think of someone who is patronizing. However, ‘condescend’ can be a lovely word.

According to the OED the literal meaning is “to come down.” The first meaning is, “To come down voluntarily.” The second meaning is, “To come or bend down, so far as a particular action is concerned, from one's position of dignity or pride; to stoop voluntarily and graciously...”

Jesus “condescends” to us. Jesus came down from heaven and incarnated as a human being: mysteriously fully human, fully divine. But this condescension is about more than the Incarnation, beautiful and holy as it is. This seems to be the whole, confounding trajectory of Jesus’ life: to always go lower. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends...” (John 15:15) On this journey downward, if we are all servants of one another, if we care for one another’s dignity as human beings, then we *are* Jesus’s friends. Therein lies our freedom.