

The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 10:35-45

The Power of Love*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Over the years, I've come to learn many things about each of you. I may have learned your names, who your loved ones are, what you do for a living, and what your ministries are here at the Little Church. After all, that's my job as your parish priest. But you may not realize that there's one piece of information that's particularly important to me. And that's where you sit in church.

Each of you is associated, in my mind's eye, with a particular location in the church. When I see Philip, for example, I think "back right, center aisle." Cal is "front right, window aisle." Les and Paul are "back left, organ aisle." Alexandra is "front left, center aisle." And we all know where Claudia sits!

There are a number of reasons for knowing where everyone sits. One of them is figuring out, at a glance, who might be missing in a given week – and whether a pastoral check-in might be needed. Another reason is knowing where to look for visual feedback when I'm preaching. (But don't worry – just because I've mentioned all this to you, it doesn't mean that you can't move or change your seats. I'll still find you.)

In today's gospel passage from Mark, we hear about the apostles fighting over their seats. James and John approach Jesus and tell him that they would like to sit at his right and at his left in glory – one on either side. This not-so-subtle jockeying for power, of course, makes the other ten apostles angry.

In the Ancient Near East, much like today, where you sat mattered a lot. Your seat was an indication of how powerful you were. Kings, judges, and teachers sat in places of honor. Those who were more powerful sat closer to these leaders. Those who were less powerful sat further away. And so, it's not surprising that the other apostles were upset by James and John wanting to sit on either side of Jesus.

Jesus responds to this conflict by teaching the apostles a lesson about servant leadership. He reminds them that one's status in the Kingdom of God does not depend on sitting in the highest or most honored places. Rather, Jesus tells them that "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." That is, whoever wishes to be first, must be "slave of all." Using himself as an example, Jesus says, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

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This notion of servant leadership was a shocking concept in the Ancient Near East. It was inconceivable to the people of Jesus' day that the Messiah – the anointed ruler who ushered in the New Jerusalem – was actually the one who gave up his life for his subjects.

But it's true that the first must be "slave of all." In the Kingdom of God, it's not about the *love of power* – such as where one's seat is located. Rather, it's about the *power of love* – as demonstrated in one's service and sacrifice for others. Changing one's mindset from the love of power to the power of love is what today's gospel reading is all about.

Although Jesus tries to teach the apostles about what servant leadership means, James and John just don't get it. When James and John say that they are able to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks, they think that they will be treated like honored guests at a banquet. But what drinking from Jesus' cup really means, is sharing in the great suffering that Jesus will bear during his passion and his crucifixion. Indeed, when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays fervently that the cup of suffering will pass from him.

And when James and John say that they are willing to be baptized with Jesus' baptism, they think that they will be ritually cleansed or purified. But what being baptized with Jesus really means, is dying with Christ. As Paul writes in the sixth chapter of Romans, "therefore we have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death." No wonder Jesus tells James and John that "You don't know what you are asking"!

In the Kingdom of God, to lead is to serve others. And to serve others is to share in Christ's suffering and sacrifice. This theme of servant leadership is reinforced by the other readings for today. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we hear about the suffering servant, who prefigured Jesus and his passion and crucifixion. Similarly, in the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear about how Jesus was not just a new high priest, but he was also the sacrifice itself – that is, the one who was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

I started this sermon by noting how we have the freedom to choose where we sit in the Little Church. But this wasn't always the case. In the 19th century, parishioners actually paid money for the right to sit in a particular pew. That is, pews were rented out by the parish. The closer the pew was to the pulpit or the altar, the higher the cost – and the higher social standing of the pew occupants.

Our founding rector, the first Fr. Houghton, had a humiliating experience involving pews when he was a newly-ordained deacon right out of seminary. During one of his first Sundays at a local church (the Church of the Holy Communion), Houghton couldn't find a place to sit. And so he was ushered into a vacant pew. Shortly thereafter, the "renter" of the pew arrived and was upset that someone was sitting in "his" pew. (Houghton was new to the parish, and so the parishioner didn't know who he was.) Even though there was space for both of them, the parishioner wanted to sit in his pew all by himself. And so the parishioner held open the door and refused to get in until Fr. Houghton got out. Not exactly servant leadership.

When Fr. Houghton founded the Church of the Transfiguration a few years later, he never forgot his experience with rented pews. He tried to convince the vestry that the parish should be

rent free so that parishioners could sit wherever they wanted. Being good fiduciaries, however, the vestry insisted that the parish needed the income in order to finance the new church building. (Not much has changed over the years.) The rector and the vestry ultimately reached a compromise: ten percent of the pews would be designated as free seats.

Fr. Houghton continued to advocate for free pews throughout his rectorate. It was not until well over a century later – in October of 1961 – that pew rents were finally abolished at the Little Church. You can still see remnants of the pew rent system in the name plates that are affixed to the end of each pew.

The lesson of today's gospel is that there are no rented pews in the Kingdom of God. There is no distinction between first class and economy in the Kingdom of God. There is no distinction between orchestra and standing-room-only in the Kingdom of God. Rather, we are called to choose the power of love over the love of power.

Later in the mass, you will be invited to come up to the high altar to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. There is no charge for the sacrament. And there is no such thing as second-class status at the altar rail. In fact, it is through the eucharistic feast that we get a glimpse – and taste – of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said, “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” May we leave this place fed, nourished, and ready to exercise servant leadership, just as Christ Jesus did. Regardless of where we may sit.