

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Bottoms Up

Sermon Reflection Notes

We continued the Upside Down sermon series this week, reflecting on how God's ways are so radically different than the ways of the world. We began two weeks ago thinking about how, according to Jesus, the Kingdom of God belongs to the little children who are filled with creativity, wonder, and delight. Last week we heard the story of the rich man who asked how to inherit eternal life and the answer astounds us all: we can't do anything to earn eternal life...it's all God's grace; and yet, we are called to give our things away, to make room for God's grace.

This week, we heard the story of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, the first two disciples called by Jesus to come and follow him. They came to Jesus with a question about their own status, their own roles in the ministry of Jesus. They wanted to be appointed to sit at the right and left hands of Jesus in all his glory. It's a request that often puts us on edge, like it did the other disciples. How dare they ask for such a thing? Just who do they think they are? But--what if they are just ambitious leaders who want to have some say and agency in this new ministry? What if they just are highly organized people who see the need for a plan and someone to take charge and are ready to step into those roles?

The problem is, they had no idea what they were asking. Jesus listened to their requests and replied: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" James and John didn't get it. They didn't understand the ghastly implications of what that phrase means. Because in the upside down, inside out world of Jesus, the places of honor are on the crosses to the left and right of His.

The other disciples got angry and Jesus reminded them that they are bickering about becoming the very people in authority they despised. Jesus' form of leadership is paradoxical to their, and our, understanding; it defies logic, economic pressure, even pride. Jesus said, be a servant. Rev. Beaton suggested the most outlandish Christian teaching may be the notion that an all-powerful God created all that is, and then entered creation to serve it...to even die for it. To make it beautiful. Jesus entered the world and rejected its understanding of power and authority, of glory and honor.

Following Jesus seems so simple. Be a servant. Love God. Love neighbor. But it is such a strange, subversive thing. It is counter to the way the world 'works.' Jesus subverted systems with a dominate and subordinate, winners and loser, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed, valued and unbeloved. Jesus went beyond humility to humiliation. He resisted authoritarian systems even unto death on a cross. And he invites us to resist such systems too. We often say Jesus died on a cross for the forgiveness of sins, and that is true. But the cross shows the depths to which God will go to offer an alternative form of power through humble service and love.

How might we, in this upside down world, lean into that alternative way? How might we be motivated to follow Jesus? To serve the least of these? To reimagine success? To redefine

leadership? We are called to be like Jesus...and to accept the love and grace of God we find in the process.

Scripture

Mark 10: 35-45

(NRSVUE)

³⁵ 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." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ 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?" ³⁹ 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, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² 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. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Discussion Questions

1. "Ambition's most fundamental characteristic is the energy of the soul that propels us to use ourselves to the fullest. It is our yearning to be, to do, to become." (*Ambition in Ministry*, Robert Schnase) Do we see ambition as a primarily positive or negative drive? What are possible outcomes of positive ambition? Of negative ambition?
2. Does it change our perception of James and John if we look at them as wanting to help the mission? What if it had been Mary Magdalene who had asked the question? Are the energies and risks of ambition for men different than those for women?
3. In the words of Paul in Philippians 2: Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Jesus was God, and yet he didn't try to remain equal with God; he made himself nothing and humbled himself, even to death on a cross. This early hymn of the church talks about servant leadership. What are the qualities that define the alternative servant leadership of Jesus?
4. How do we translate those qualities Jesus models into servant leadership in a world that glorifies power and control, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders?

5. Where do we see authoritative systems at work? What kinds of things can we do about them?

Closing Prayer

We come to worship to hear the stories, to sing the songs, to have our hearts and minds turned upside down. Even as we willingly come to have you work in our lives, we acknowledge that we often ask the wrong questions, make the wrong plans, focus on the wrong things. Heal us and help us. Turn us upside down so we can see the world as you created it to be. Help us become people who can answer your call to service. We pray in the name of Jesus, who leads us to be servants. Amen.

"If you want to be great, if you want to be on the right and left of God, you can be. But know what you are asking."