

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Mark 10: 35-45
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA
October 18, 2009

“They didn't get it. Do we?”

Have you ever noticed that Mark doesn't really cast the disciples in the best light? I mean, even though they've been following Jesus around for some time, listening to him teach, watching him perform miracles, casting out demons, healing the sick, it seems as though they still don't GET what Jesus is all about. In the verses just before our gospel reading for today, verses that are not included in the lectionary reading, Jesus has told his disciples about his death and resurrection for the third time. The third time!

The first time this happens is in Mark chapter 8, right after Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah. It says: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Do you remember what happens after Jesus tells the disciples of his death? Peter takes him aside and challenges him, rebukes him. Peter, the man who was the first apostle to declare that Jesus is the Messiah! We don't know what Peter is upset about but we do know how Jesus responds: ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

The second time Jesus speaks of the suffering that will take place is in Mark chapter 9. Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Galilee: “for he was teaching his disciples saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed he will rise again.’” The group arrives in Capernaum and Jesus asks them what they were arguing about during their journey, after he had mentioned his death and resurrection for the second time. None of the disciples would admit to what they were arguing about but Jesus knew. They were arguing about who was the greatest out of the twelve. And he says to them: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

And now we come to today's reading, the third time Jesus tells the disciples of his death. This reading follows last week's reading. Do you remember? That whole camel through the eye of the needle story?

“They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘See we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”

Jesus goes into a lot of detail this time. I don't know about you, but if someone that I had been following for quite some time, someone I considered to be a great leader, someone I respected and loved told me that horrific things were going to happen very

soon I don't think the first thing out of my mouth would be: "I want you to do whatever I ask of you. I want to sit at your right hand in glory."

But that's what James and John do. Right after Jesus has predicted the passion, in the very next line, they demand glory and a place of honor. Now maybe James and John just wanted to change the subject, maybe they were uncomfortable hearing all this doom and gloom stuff. But don't you wonder if they've been paying attention at all as they've gone city to city, seen Jesus walk on water and heal the sick. James, John and Peter were even there on the mountain at the transfiguration! They saw Elijah and Moses speaking with Jesus! They saw his clothes become dazzling white! They don't get it! They are so focused on the fame, the glory, and the honor.

One aspect of this passage that intrigues me is the reaction from the other disciples after James and John ask to sit at the left and right hand of Jesus. They get angry. Now you know, on some level, they're angry because James and John asked this question before they were able to. They wanted to sit at the right and the left too! They want to be glorified!

Aren't we the same way? We all daydream about fame and glory. We have fantasies of standing out, being recognized. When we watch the Olympics and see those athletes up on the stands receiving their medals, we dream of being up there too. When we watch the Academy Awards, we dream of being the stunning actor or actress in the bright lights with that gold statue in our hands. We dream of being the most admired person in the room; the person who is considered the most successful. This is normal and harmless.

But, if our fantasies of fame and glory are made real in our daily lives, then we have a problem. When we push others down in order to climb up higher, then we're being destructive. When we become snobbish because someone doesn't have the same education as us, then we're being hateful.

And churches do this! I recently read the following in a church bulletin: "Thank you to the three voting members of our congregation who attended the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis (it then gave the names of the individuals being discussed) – a doctor, a lawyer, and a professor! Not that bad!" Yes, it is great that these people were able to attend the assembly. Yes, it is great that these people belong to this church. But, by pointing out these people's educational background it's almost like the church is saying that only these people of status in society can be voting members, only these people of status in society represent this church. The church is a place where degrees, and salary, and clothes, and societal status DO NOT matter.

Instead of getting mad and yelling at James and John, Jesus asks them if they are willing to drink the cup that he must drink, if they are willing to be baptized as he was baptized. They answer yes. He then tells all of the disciples that he did not come to be served but TO serve. To serve all. The poor, the sick, those who have been cast out, those who have been oppressed. Jesus serves them all. This is how greatness is achieved. This is how glory is realized.

And guess what? You don't have to have a degree to serve others. You don't have to be rich to serve others. You don't have to be famous to serve others. You don't have to have an award to serve others. Anyone can serve. Anyone.

I'd like to close this morning with the end of a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King delivered this sermon titled "Drum Major Instinct" at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia on February 4, 1968, two months before he was assassinated.

"Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator—that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself, "What is it that I would want said?" And I leave the word to you this morning.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize – that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards – that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

If I can help somebody as I pass along. If I can cheer somebody with a word or song. If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong. Then my living will not be in vain. If I can do my duty as a Christian ought. If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought. If I can spread the message as the master taught. Then my living will not be in vain.

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right or your left side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. But I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world. Amen."