

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
October 18, 2009
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 24)**

Job 38:1-7, 34-41
Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

The reading from Mark this week is the text for a famous sermon by the Rev. Martin Luther King called “The Drum Major Instinct.” The sermon was preached in 1968 and people still care. That is pretty good history for a sermon, and it is a tough act to follow. The challenge in trying to write an address on the topic of the Battle of Gettysburg is that everyone is thinking “Four score and seven years ago...” Dr. King’s sermon is not so famous as the Gettysburg Address, but I feel as if I need to mention it and issue a disclaimer or give credit where credit is due maybe.

Dr. King says that we are all driven to be number one. It is our instinct, and this is what keeps advertisers and car manufacturers appealing to our egos. We want to be better than others and seem to be programmed to compete. Think for a moment about people you know who want to compare themselves to others all the time. Think about people you know who always need to be better than someone else. Thank God I am better than those people! (I apologize for my poor humor here.)

Today’s Gospel has a classic moment for the disciples. We have been hearing for the last few weeks about the rich man and about the children. Jesus has been telling the disciples that he will suffer and die. Presumably this is sinking in, but you would not know it from the questions. Between last week’s reading and the one we got today, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection for the third time on the road to Jerusalem. Today, James and John ask Jesus to give them special positions of honor in the Kingdom. They say “Let one of us sit at your right, and one on your left in glory. It would seem to take a lot of nerve to ask for something like this.

To me at least the interesting thing is that the disciples get angry with James and John. This is interesting because you have to ask “why?” Are they angry because James and John asked a stupid question and they are missing the point? Or were they angry because they are jealous? I don’t want read too much into this, but I strongly suspect that they were jealous. It would be consistent here anyway. It is not just James and John who don’t get it. The disciples in general have been thinking of themselves in the recent readings, and Jesus is teaching them with one example after another that it is not all about them. It is not all about what the world considers success. It is not all about us although we often think it is.

Now this is a great opportunity to point fingers at James and John for being so self-absorbed. James and John think they are better than Peter and Andrew. We think we are better than James

and John. Suddenly the lesson today is not about some guys who seem to be a little slow who are on the way to Jerusalem with Jesus. The lesson is about us.

This was the point of Dr. King's "Drum Major Instinct" sermon too. We are the disciples who don't get it and want to be number one.

So if we are not supposed to be thinking about how we are better than other people what are we supposed to be thinking about? It turns out that we are supposed to be thinking about these other people. We are supposed to be servants to others. This servant thing is tough, because Jesus is the model. That is a high standard to try to meet.

Jesus did not run around saying "Look at me!" He did not point out that his donkey was a better model or that his disciples all went to better schools. Jesus was humble and thought of others.

Jesus takes things and turns them upside down. He upsets the status quo. My daughter Sarah, when she was little, used to ask about whether someone was the "boss of" her. Earthly authority is being the "boss of" someone in this Sarah sense. Divine greatness is defined as being "servant to."

The problem of course is that no one seems to get the lesson today. There are examples every time you pick up the newspaper of someone who had his moments of seeming greatness. It is the fleeting quality of the quest to be number one and the tragic fall. In the paper of course we get to see the crash and burn in slow motion and read all the lurid detail.

Bernie Madoff is an obvious in the recent news of someone who found some fleeting monetary power, but it turned out to be a house of cards. Our country's credit-card debt is another house of cards really that is part of our quest to live beyond our means and be something that we are not.

To be great in God's eyes is not to be a person of power and influence. It is not the rich man on the road to Jerusalem who has the inside track to the Kingdom of heaven. The person who is great in God's eyes has a life modeled after Jesus. This is a life of service to others.

If you are like me as I read this, I feel a moment of panic. James and John are walking with Jesus and he is teaching them as they walk. If these guys don't get it, how am I supposed to?

The message in the Gospels is that **we are** walking with Jesus. He is teaching us as we read Scripture. As we give ourselves in service to our brothers and sisters, we find Christ in them and can learn from them as well. We have an additional advantage in that we can read the story of James and John and learn from it too.

I think the first thing we need to do is look at our motives. Are we motivated by a worldly desire for wealth or power? I am not saying that either one is bad. I am saying though that if what drives your actions is a desire for money, you are building on some feeble foundations. We have to keep Christ and service foremost.

Here is my first challenge to you. As you live your life in the next week, ask yourself what it is that motivates you. What is it that drives you to action? If we are serving God, we are motivated by love for others, and it is not selfish.

Here is the second challenge for the next week. Once we have looked at the motives, we need to look for God. There is a tendency to think of heavenly realms and harps and choirs of angels. I don't know about you, but where I work there are not many heavenly realms and harps. We will hear a choir of angels shortly when we sing the "Servant Song," but for the most part, we have lives that may not seem to have much evidence of God's hand. That hand is there though, and Jesus is there to be found in our neighbors.

We can serve God in small ways that don't seem glorious. This is after all the very essence of being a servant. We need to be aware of God's presence all around us and understand that as we do our jobs, we are serving God. This can be a stretch sometimes I realize, but authentic servanthood may very well be about doing the mundane and the day to day tasks with grace.

Last week, my parting comment was about grace and hope. This week Jesus does the same thing for us. He ends on redemption. It is not about how we fall short because we will. In the end it is about redemption and the fact that Jesus died for us.

So live your lives as servants and understand that you are serving God as you serve others.

Look for God's presence and rejoice.

Live in the confidence of redemption.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen