

sermon-10/18/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Faithfulness, Not Effectiveness”  
Mark 10:35-45

I remember my father telling me about a pastor who wanted to move from the Midwest to the west coast. One of the larger churches in Portland was interviewing him as a possible pastor. As part of the interview he was to preach in what we call a “neutral pulpit,” in another church so that only the committee doing the interview would hear him. That neutral pulpit was my father’s church.

My dad, as a friendly gesture, was taking the visiting pastor on a tour of the area so he might see if this was someplace he would like to live. As they were driving around, the pastor said to my father, “So Jim, where is my next move after I get this church?”

Such arrogance and naked ambition was stunning. It reminds us that all of us are vulnerable to the temptation ambition poses, even ministers. I might add, especially ministers. Ambition, prestige, positions of power are all very seductive. That is the focus of our gospel lesson for today.

Three times in Mark’s gospel, in three consecutive chapters, from 8:31 to 10:34, Jesus predicts his death on a cross. After each prediction one or more of the disciples say something stupid. In 8:31 Peter strongly objects to Jesus’ death. Mark even says Peter rebukes Jesus, who responds by calling Peter Satan.

In 9:31 the twelve disciples argue among themselves over who is the greatest. Now in chapter ten after Jesus once again predicts his death on the cross James and John ask Jesus for positions of power when he ushers in his kingdom in all his glory.

This third instance is perhaps the worst one of them all. Have the disciples not learned anything? How in the world could they hear about Jesus’ horrible death on a cross and then turn around and ask for something so selfish?

Matthew must have been embarrassed for James and John. So, in his gospel, instead of James and John asking Jesus for special privileges, he has their mother ask Jesus to give her boys special treatment (Matt. 20:20). Some of the women in my lectionary class said that was typical of a man, blaming it on a woman!

Unfortunately, if we were to look very carefully at ourselves, we are not surprised by James and John’s silly, inappropriate request. As one Presbyterian seminary professor has said, we all have Zebedee DNA in our genes. We all are capable of being that self-centered and clueless.

One commentator argued it might not be quite that bad. He said maybe James and John were just frightened when they heard Jesus talk about his death on a cross. What could that mean for them? So, instead of ambition when they asked to sit at his right and left

hand, they might have been responding out of fear and the need for security. Maybe if they were in a position of power they wouldn't be so vulnerable.

Sadly, wanting power to lessen our fear and make us more secure seldom leads us to very faithful acts. Sometimes fear can make us deaf to what God is trying to say through others. Little did James and John know that it was the thieves crucified on either side of Jesus who were the ones to be on his left and his right. The road to Jesus' glory went through the cross. Thus, being on his left and right hand was not an easy, secure place to be.

Mark makes it clear after each of the disciples' stupid remarks that the real issue for Jesus was servant leadership. If we wish to be a leader in Jesus' commonwealth, we will need to be a servant, and even a slave! That was a hard sell in Jesus' day. It continues to be a hard sell today.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in remarking on servanthood has said it is not like boot camp. It is not like you get the hard stuff over with and then you get the good seats in the kingdom. No, servanthood is an end in itself. When in following Jesus we become leaders in his kingdom, it is all about servant leadership.

Jesus is trying to turn the world upside down. He sees power and authority in such a different way than does his culture. Not much has changed. He is turning our world upside down if we take him seriously. Herb O'Driscoll puts it this way. The world bases authority on power. Jesus bases authority on service.

For those of us who call ourselves Christians, that sounds reasonable. Who can be against service? But, my guess would be most of us don't finally believe there is much authority in service. After all, is it not the powerful in our world who makes things happen? Isn't it the movers and the shakers who change the world? If one wants to be effective, doesn't one first have to get into positions of power?

I don't think Jesus was all that concerned about being effective. He was more concerned about being faithful to what God was calling him to be and do. If you were to judge Jesus' life as to how effective he was while he lived on this earth, we can't help but see he was not all that effective. Most people finally rejected his message. Even his closest disciples did not get it. They all ran away when he got into trouble. One could say his message of servant leadership was a colossal failure. But, look at what God did with his failure.

When we are most concerned about being effective, we seem to get into the most trouble. We end up thinking if the world is to get any better it is going to be all up to us. We are tempted to say the ends justify the means. We will do things that fall into gray ethical areas if we think they will make it easier to attain our noble goal of a more just world. Just look at this country's track record dealing with terrorism.

This has been something the Bible has emphasized right from Adam and Eve in Genesis. Henri Nouwen talks about this in terms of our temptation to replace love with power. He writes, "The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led."

Power and control just feel so much better than suffering love and servanthood, don't they? The question for us is this. How are we going to change our ways? How are we going to embrace being servants? And the answer is: one step at a time.

The lectionary class talked about some of the ways they are working on this. One mentioned helping out with Bridge Ministry. There is something about being with folks who don't have much power or prestige, at least in terms of how the world understands those realities, to see things through God's eyes. Serving the least of these opens us to an experience of God's presence. If you want to find out what I am talking about, come tonight at 4:00 p.m. as Newport hosts a Sunday Celebration for Bridge Ministries.

Another person in the class says pick just one justice issue and get involved with just that one issue. It is so easy to get overwhelmed with all that is wrong with our world. If you are like me, I get countless emails asking me to sign this petition, go to that rally, call my Congressperson, etc. It is just too much. It leads to guilt and being paralyzed.

But, if we can just pick one issue and do one little thing for that issue, it is a step toward siding with those Jesus sided with in his day. It is a step toward faithful servanthood. It is not letting the need to be effective paralyze us.

I want to close with one observation. While faithfulness is the goal and not effectiveness, that doesn't mean we get nothing out of this. One commentator put it this way, "The promise of the gospel is that in the sacrifice of self for others, not only will a higher and better self emerge, but the reign of God will continue to unfold."

We are better people when we go with Jesus' upside down perspective. We will find we like who we are becoming. And the world will be a better place as well. Sounds like a win/win situation to me. Amen