

Sunday October 21st, 2018
Pentecost 22

PRAYER: O Teacher, we dare not make demands of you. Unlike James and John, we do not claim the honour of sitting beside you in glory. We ask only that you make our hearts the seat of your presence, that we might serve your purpose as zealously as we have served our own. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Since we have a great high priest, Jesus Christ, who has passed through the heavens, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us with confidence draw near the throne of grace, with assurance that in Christ we are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: “O people of all nations of the earth, ascribe great strength and glory to his name! Yes, ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name! Bring an offering and come before him.” (I Chronicles 29:8,9)

OFFERTORY PRAYER: We draw near your throne of grace, O God, renewed by your mercy and enlivened by your power. You have given us the gift of a Saviour so that in you “we live and move and have our being.” Your Spirit resides with us as a source of encouragement and strength. Accept what we bring now as signs of our faithfulness and bless what we do hereafter as we express our commitment. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, who demonstrated what love and service to others should be through Christ Jesus, look upon us with understanding. Despite centuries of knowing the lessons of our Lord, countless sermons and bible studies, we still struggle to put into practice his call to welcome the least of these and to be servants to all. Time and time again, it would appear to the world and to you that we serve folly and foolishness. For we too, have the gall like the sons of Zebedee to come to you and ask, no demand, that you do for us whatever we ask. And so, in your infinite grace you say to us, “What would you have me do for you?”

Emboldened by our own hubris we muster our audacity and ask if we can have the seats of honour, both in this world and in the next. When you gently warn us that we know not what we ask, we are impudent enough to say that we are able to drink of your cup and be baptized with your baptism. You are right, dear Lord. We have no idea what it is we ask of you. For the cup is filled with selfless service and the baptism leads to sacrifice-even to the point of suffering. Because that service, that sacrifice is where your glory lies.

We do not understand, or do not want to understand. And so, you remain patient with us. You tolerate our prideful indiscretions, our arrogant presumptions. As you have so many times, you once again try to teach us the hard lesson that true greatness, lies in being a servant, and majesty resides with the least.

Forgive our slow learning on this matter, O God. Forgive our blustery confidence that erupts in speech when silence would be the better course. Forgive our haughty swagger, that struts among the weak and suffering, when kneeling and washing their feet would be better.

No one knows more than you the difficult road the way of the cross is. We like your Son would ask that the cup be passed from us. We long for easier roads to reach your intended potential for us. It almost wrecks us to realize that to be our best in your Kingdom, means that we must be refined by fire. It is no wonder so many would rather turn away, or not plumb the depths of the abundant life you offer.

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Thank you that no matter how challenging our time of refinement is, that you never abandon us. Further more you grant us fellowship, with our brothers and sisters, who can pray and walk with us. Grant us a sympathizing and empathetic heart O God, when those we love are in a time of testing. Let us not run from them thinking that somehow this refinement is contagious, but instead let us enter into the journey and extend an understanding born of our own trials.

Grant us your peace, O God, if the resolution of our trials are not as we expected or desired. Help us to fully trust that all things work for God and you have a larger plan at work in our lives, in our families, in our community and in this church. Remind us of the truth of the Apostle Paul who told the Corinthians that “as we share abundantly in Christ’s suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (2 Cor. 1:5)

BENEDICTION: Go to the world in confidence, for there the table of the Lord is spread. Draw near; drink from its cup, and receive the mercy of God. Draw near; partake of its bread and find the grace of God. Go, and the feast shall be to you as you shall be to your neighbour: a very present help in time of trouble. Amen.

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Mark 10:35-45

“Be Careful What You Ask For!”

I think it is pretty universal, that no one likes arrogance expressed by someone else. On a related note, it is also true that we struggle sometimes to see when we are being arrogant ourselves. I say this because it seems, we spend a great deal of time, and energy, trying to impress others. Trying to make ourselves look indispensable, or more valuable than others. It is one of the reasons that we like to name drop. That is when we claim to know or met someone famous.

This is especially true of young men, or women, trying to impress their dates. As an example, we have the young man who was bragging to his date that he was related to royalty. His arrogance was thoroughly boring the young lady. Finally, in exasperation, she agreed that he was related to royalty, namely to King Kong. (1002 Humorous Illustrations, p. 291) Today's Gospel lesson is quite famous among we Christian folk. Anybody whose been in the church for a while has heard this passage and a sermon or two about it.

Just a word of caution is needed when approaching passages like this one before us today. Since we are always looking back at Jesus' ministry and teaching, let us acknowledge we are pretty apt to pass scathing judgment on James and John; sometimes referred to as the “Sons of Thunder”.

This nickname refers to the time when Jesus was rejected by a Samaritan village in Luke 9:54, and they asked Jesus if he wanted them to ask God to rain down fire on the unbelieving villagers. Today though, they come with that famous request; to sit on the right hand and left hand of Jesus, when he comes into his kingdom. The request is significant because in many cultures the seats on the left and right of whoever is the ruler or master, are the seats of honour.

On a side note, it is interesting that in Matthew 20, the account depicts the mother of James and John making the request. Some commentators see this as a way to soften the judgment upon the two brothers, but I see it as perhaps the two brothers trying to manipulate Jesus by sending their own mother to make the request. It is also true that this must have left an indelible imprint on the disciples, and the early church, because three Gospel's record it.

Looking back, we now understand that Jesus' Kingdom is all about servanthood. It's about the last being first, the high being brought low, the least of these becoming the most significant. We shake our heads at James and John, and think “how could they not get it”. How could these two brothers be so shallow? But not so fast. Let us be honest that sometimes our servanthood is also motivated by self-aggrandizement.

We too, want people to see what we have done for Jesus. This temptation is very well described in a parody song by Weird Al Yankovic's entitled “Amish Paradise”, where he portrays an Amish man singing, “You know I'm a million times as humble as thou art.” Another modern take on this is the old song, “Oh, Lord it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way. To know me is to love me, I get better looking each day.”

I suspect it would be prudent if we check our judgment of James and John at the door, and recognise that we are probably much closer to the disciple's reaction.

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We read that when the remaining disciples learned of the request for the seats of honour, the ten remaining disciples became angry. They were angry at the hubris in asking. Thinking they were more important than the other ten. They were angry at assuming they themselves could not receive those seats. This was an ongoing problem Jesus confronted. Remembering their argument over who was the greatest, each one probably thought these seats were theirs.

And once again, Jesus has to stress to them that being like Gentile tyrants, is not the Kingdom way. Now, here is where the passage gets interesting, and also very scary. There is a spiritual landmine, so to speak, embedded in this passage. At first, we might be tempted to just run over it, as being a simple metaphor, but it is a critical statement by Jesus. Jesus turns to the two brothers and asks, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I was baptized with?”

In my preparations for this week, I ran across a commentator named Sarah Wilson (Working Preacher) who pointed out that the appearance of the word baptism here is actually quite startling. Up until this point, the word “baptism” is only used in Mark’s account in reference to John the Baptist. In fact, I was surprised to learn that as far as anyone knows, John was the first person to actually baptise other people.

Until this point, Jews practiced baptism as a ritual cleansing. The community at Qumran where the Essenes were located, and the Dead Sea Scrolls written and preserved, were known to baptize themselves a few times every day. The goal was ritual purity; to get the dirt off, so to speak. In theological speak, this practice is called, *autobaptism* or self-baptism. Perhaps that is why John receives so much attention, because he now gets the idea to baptise others.

To perform the rite of absolution, or forgiveness of sins on other people. It was so unique, and John’s message so powerful, that people flocked out to the wilderness to be baptised by him. Then John doubles down in his preaching. He had just introduced baptising others, and now he says that someone is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Now just a brief point here. Luke and Matthew talk about baptizing with fire, but Mark does not.

So, sure enough, who comes along to be baptized in the Jordan by John? Jesus. And what happens when he comes out of the water? The Holy Spirit falls upon him like a dove. He is baptized with the Holy Spirit. Even still the baptism thing, seems to be John’s activity. John is referred to often as the Baptist. It becomes almost his last name. Even Jesus talks about the “baptism of John” in Mark 11:20, when he is challenged as to the origin of his authority.

Jesus never gains the description as a baptizer, nor is he ever recorded as having baptized anyone. It also may be why the early church found it necessary in Matthew to add the Great Commission to the Gospel, to try to give baptism its importance in the mission of the church. So, why all of a sudden does Jesus mention baptism here? I mean of all times he could mention it, why in connection to this discussion about seats of honour, and servanthood?

The point is, the reference to baptism is unexpected, but it is intentional. Therefore, we ought to pay attention to it. It is so startling that that is perhaps why Matthew attributes this episode to the brother’s mother, and mentions the cup, but not the baptism.

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Luke drops the whole incident, although refers in 12:20 to “a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” The intension of Jesus here, seems clear enough. Usually when we refer to baptism in the church, we are referring to a symbol of our being buried with Jesus, and then raised to new life. It is a beautiful symbol, and one we are called on to undertake as faithful followers of Jesus.

Mark, however, is going one step further. He links Jesus’ baptism, not just to his death and resurrection, but to Jesus’ entire passion experience. In other words, the whole journey and experience of going to the cross. The same could be said, about the cup. When Jesus asks James and John if they can be baptized with the baptism he experiences, they rashly reply yes. It is clear to me that they had no idea what they were agreeing to. Jesus then says that they will be baptized with his baptism.

Now here is where it gets really interesting, at least I think so. Remember I said that John was the first to undertake baptizing others. So, which baptism is Jesus talking about? Is he talking about self-baptism, or a baptism that someone does to you like John. This baptism by John is called theologically, *heterobaptism*. It seems clear to me from reading about Jesus passion experience, of going to the cross, that he is speaking of heterobaptism.

The journey to Calvary is an experience one must undergo, not an action one chooses to undertake. One of the significant things that differentiates Christianity from other religions is that baptisms are not performed on ourselves, but like Jesus did, we must humbly approach and let someone in the name of God baptize us. James and John’s big mistake was in assuming that glory in the Kingdom of God comes from doing something, seeking something.

They thought of it as autobaptism. Jesus is saying that glory and honour in the Kingdom of God are achieved not by action, but by passion, or suffering. Their boastful response, “we are able” is ironic, given the end of the passage, where we learn that they will experience this passion, this baptism, but it will not be what they expected.

This idea, this truth about following Jesus, is at the heart of our faith. The Apostle Paul, quoting perhaps one of the earliest hymns, or credal statements of the church in Philippians, writes’

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross.

And what was the result of this passion, this baptism that Jesus under went? *“Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The application of these thoughts about the baptism Jesus is talking about, are very challenging to hear, much less accept. We have become a whole culture of James and Johns. The world is clamouring for the seats of honour. We want to be seen as significant, special by the society in which we reside.

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If, as I suggest, Jesus is calling us to a passive acceptance of our own experience of the suffering of Christ's passion, no wonder we feel so lost in this world. A world of triumphalism, dog eat dog economics, and a perpetual sense that we are all victims. This passage alone is a direct condemnation of the prosperity gospel, hawked by so many prominent television preachers. It is amazing the popularity of such theology, given the overwhelming scriptural references that link faith and suffering.

John 16:33 says, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Romans 5:3-5, "More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has given to us."

1 Peter 4:12-19, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange, were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." And there are dozens and dozens more. To remain faithful to Christ, James and John entered Christ's passion and suffered greatly, as did the other disciples and Christians ever since.

In recent memory no one has understood the inevitability of suffering more than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He resisted the Nazi regime, and worked tirelessly to undermine its influence of evil and darkness. Unfortunately, eventually he was arrested, threatened with torture, and by order of Heinrich Himmler, was executed in April 1945, just days before the concentration camp was liberated.

Bonhoeffer wrote, "Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passive* suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the Church as the community of those 'who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake'...Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer." (John Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*)

It has always been this way in the history of God's people. At the Nicene Council, an important church meeting in the 4th century A.D., where much of the orthodox foundations of our faith were formalized. Of the 318 delegates attending, fewer than 12 had not lost an eye or lost a hand or did not limp on a leg lamed by torture for their Christian faith. (Vance Havner)

Billie Wilcox, on the lessons of a disaster: While my husband Frank and I were living in Pakistan many years ago, our six-month-old baby died. An old Punjabi who heard of our grief came to comfort us. "A tragedy like this is similar to being plunged into boiling water," he explained. "If you are an egg, your affliction will make you hard-boiled and unresponsive. If you are a potato, you will emerge soft and pliable, resilient and adaptable." It may sound funny to God, but there have been times when I have prayed, "O Lord, let me be a potato." (*Guideposts Magazine*.)

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C.S Lewis was asked the big question on many minds, “Why do the righteous suffer?” Lewis replied, “Why not? They’re the only ones who can take it.”

This is a very hard subject to broach. You can find plenty of books, preachers, online seminars that will avoid the subject of entering into Christ’s passion, his suffering. Tony Campolo was asked to speak at a college on the subject of “Christianity as a Movement of Social Change”. The lecture was going very well. Campolo reports that he could sense that he was swaying the audience and there might even be some converts to the faith in the crowd.

The friend who invited him also sensed the mood of the crowd and became increasingly agitated. Finally, he yelled out, “Before we go any further, Tony, maybe you ought to tell them what it will cost them if they join up in this cause of yours. Maybe you ought to tell them the price that goes with the kind of radical Christianity you’re promoting!”

Campolo concludes, “He was right! It is all too easy to talk about the glorious vision of the Christian faith and never spell out what it will cost those who choose to become agents of social change in a society that has a commitment to the status quo.” (Let Me Tell You a Story, p. 131)

So please count the cost. Know what picking up your cross and following Jesus means. The cup of Christ and the baptism of Christ demand nothing less.