

No So Among You
Mark 10:35-45

In High School I was always a good student and school always came pretty easy for me, except for math, which was always a bit more of a challenge, but I learned to work hard and managed to sustain a B in honors math classes. In all my other classes, some honors, and some Advanced Placement, I made A's. Every time report cards were handed out; I was proud of what I'd accomplished. My weighted GPA was always over a 4.0. So, when I was a Junior, I was ready and excited to have my hard work acknowledged with an induction into the National Honors Society. I could just imagine my parents bursting with pride when they would attend the induction ceremony. The day came when homeroom teachers finally handed out the letters. I was so excited to receive the letter I knew I had coming my way but after handing out a handful of letters my teacher went back to her desk and sat down right as the bell rang. I was stunned. Out in the hallway as we changed classes there was a buzz of excitement as the coveted letters were opened. I walked to my next class comforting myself with the thought that there must have been a mistake. Before the day was up, I was in the guidance counselor's office seeking to find out if it really was a mistake or not. She pulled out the list and first explained that there were a lot of academically gifted students in my class and that only a certain number of students can be inducted into the National Honor Society each year. Then she shared the most devastating news of all, I was the cutoff. The list she had showed students ranked by GPA from highest to lowest with a line drawn between two names, above the line were students that got into the National Honors Society and below the line were all the other students who did not. My name was the first one below the line. I think my guidance counselor shared this information expecting me to be pleased that I was so close, but I didn't

hear it that way at all. I was devastated but more so than that I was mad that I was being denied something I felt was rightfully mine. I was so close; couldn't they have just allowed one more person in? I coveted so deeply to have a place in this group that signified who was in the top of our class and who wasn't.

As I studied our scripture text for today this experience from high school struck me with quite a rude awakening, as I figuratively looked in the mirror and saw a son of Zebedee staring back at me. You see, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, have a bold question for Jesus in our text for today. Even their approach is bold. They say, "Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Jesus, seemingly unfazed by this request simply asks, "What is it that you want me to do?" So, they say, "We would like for you to grant us this honor, we want to sit with you, one on your right side and one on your left side. We want to sit with you and all of your glory." Jesus having just prior shared with them the story of what was to come of his death and resurrection, says to them, "You do not know what you are asking." To which they insist, "Oh but we do." To which Jesus finally replies, "To sit at my right or to sit at my left is not mine to give."

Then the other disciples get word of this interaction, and their response is somewhat to be expected. They're angry with James and John. Mark doesn't tell us why they're angry, but we might assume that they are angry that James and John were so bold to ask for such. And it very well might be that they are mad they hadn't thought of it and asked for themselves first. Jesus speaks loud enough I imagine to be heard over the arguing, and says as Eugene Peterson translates it, "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and how when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with

you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave.”

Not so among you. Jesus does here what Jesus often does and flips things completely over on their side. The disciples are coveting to be the best, to have the top seat, to be the ones most honored, to be right up there equal with Jesus. They want power, they want notoriety, they want glory, but Jesus says “Not so among you, my expectation of you is different from that of the world. You are called to serve. The first will be last and the last shall be first.”

We are all in some ways sons of Zebedee. I've admitted to you one instance I know, of where I was very much acting as a son of Zebedee. But that is not the only instance, there are many more if I'm willing to be honest. We are all in some ways sons of Zebedee. It was John Calvin who said about this text that this narrative contains a “bright mirror of human vanity because it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition or some other vice of the flesh so they who follow Christ have a different object in view from what they ought to have.” It is fair to say that we might not make outlandish requests like James and John did, but it is also true that in our hearts we often covet being the best, having the very top spot, being seen in a place of recognition. As one commentator put it, “Indeed this is part of the human condition.” It is, as sin is ever present. It is the human condition that we are sinful beings, it is also part of the human condition that we fight to be at the top. We want to be the privileged ones, we want to have it better for ourselves than it is for other people, we want to be better than other people, like James and John we want glory too. It's not always bold and outlandish nor does it always have us elbowing other people out of the way. Sometimes it's subtle, sometimes we don't even know that we're doing it, often ingrained in us while we are

unaware, like the air we breathe or the water we drink. But we want privilege, we want it for ourselves, and we want it for our children- we want, and we want, and we want. But Jesus says... *not so among you*.

As I imagine you are well aware privilege has become quite the hot topic as of late. There's been lots of conversation in the news and in our country about who is privileged and who is not. This is a hard conversation. It is a difficult one for us to be having. This is because there are no quick fixes, there are no easy answers, there are no immediate solutions. As I heard someone once say it's been many, many years in the making, therefore it will not be undone quickly.

Shame also often enters this conversation about who is privileged and who isn't, which makes it even more difficult to have, but I don't feel that shame has a place here. It is fair to say, for most all of us, that the privilege we have was never something we asked for. We were born into it, therefore again I feel shame has no place in this conversation. But I think awareness does. We can't control the fact that we have been born privileged, but we can surely be aware of it. If we are aware we can pay attention in a different way, we can learn to help, we can learn to share, we can learn together how to work towards changing the systems, however painstakingly slow it may be, we can work toward seeking to change the systems that have made it this way. If we are aware of our privilege, we will be able to move through the world a bit differently and fear will begin to have less of a hold on us.

When I was a youth minister one of the things that I would repetitively say when the youth entered a space at the church where we were going to learn and study or play together, I would often say as a reminder to them, "Remember it's different here, this place is not your

school, it is not your sports team, it is not your other extracurricular activities. It's different here- here we are equals, here we love first and always, here we accept one another, here we work to create a place that is safe.”

As followers of Jesus, we are called to do other than what the world would have us do. To be in the world but not of the world. We are called to lay aside the fight for better and best and to love instead. Love, with God it always comes back to love.

There is something about this calling, this greater calling of ours as disciples of Jesus, that we love despite its difficulty. And we love it when we see it surprisingly on display, especially when it makes national news. One instance where we sometimes see this scenario play out is with runners as they compete in competitions. Someone falls, and another person in the race gives up their chance of winning to help pick up their fellow competitor who fell. The recent Olympics had a story like this. American Isaiah Jewett was about to clinch second place in the men’s 800 meters at the Tokyo Olympics when the unthinkable happened. He became entangled with Botswana’s Nijel Amos, and the two collapsed on the track. Jewett had been about to lunge for the finish line. Instead, he found himself reaching back to help his fellow athlete to his own feet. “As he looked at me, he said, ‘I’m sorry,’ ” Jewett recounted. “I said, ‘It’s OK, man.’ ” It wasn’t clear if Jewett had been tripped by Amos, or if Jewett had tripped himself. Either way, in what’s being hailed as a remarkable show of sportsmanship, Jewett slung his arm around Amos’ shoulder, and the two finished the race. Amos stepped back to give Jewett a one-stride lead, with Jewett finishing second-to-last and Amos last.

These stories warm our hearts because they are uncharacteristic of the human condition. They are outcomes we do not expect to see and outcomes that leave us questioning

what we might so if faced with a similar situation. It is often more likely that the other runners would continue to run on concerned only about winning the race. But Jesus says- *not so among you*. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. I don't think this was what James and John were hoping to hear from Jesus. A look in the mirror isn't what we hope for either. We would much rather slide on past the difficult things, myself included. But if I take my calling as Jesus' disciple seriously enough, I need to listen and I need to be paying attention.

Jesus says, "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and how when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant."

Let us pray... God of wonder and mystery, your word challenges us in ways that are difficult to grasp, in ways that make us uncomfortable. Draw near to us in that discomfort, draw near to us that we might be faithful, draw near to us that we might serve as you have called us to do, draw near to us that we might build bridges. It always comes back to love -your love for us that enables us to love one another. God help us to love and help us to step our way into a broader understanding of who we are and who you call us to be. To you, O God, be all glory and honor, now and always, Amen.

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October 17, 2021