

Once again the disciples seem a little like children, not in the way we've been hearing Jesus urge us to be, but in the way we - well, at least I, acted as a child. And, truth to be told, still do upon occasion. At least John and James act as a team - I would have been trying to one-up my brother by getting to Jesus first.

James and John ask to sit on Jesus' right and left in his Glory and he responds by asking if they understand what they are asking? Can you do what is required? And, I love this part, they say, 'yes, we are able'. Ah, human beings! How amusing we are. Of course, we can do it. How hard can it be? I ask my TV that question a lot.

Before we condemn J&J for wanting glory for themselves, it's important to know that right before today's text, Jesus has taken the 12 aside and laid out for them step by step what is coming. "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; **34** they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

So, James and John are yearning to have an ongoing connection with Jesus. He is not harsh with them. He sees that his description of the coming days has rattled them. Even when they claim to be able to do what Jesus does, he doesn't mock them, he affirms what they can do and explains what He can't do, explains where his authority ends and God's begins.

But when the other 10 hear James and John asking for this privilege, egos are on alert. They become angry. I can just picture my brother; I can just remember myself - how come he gets to watch the Twilight Zone????!!!! Like the disciples, we were very aware of who was getting what and how that defined our relative status.

And, that is what Jesus hears from the 10 - not a sincere yearning but some very ruffled feathers and some threatened selves. Jesus stops them. They are exercising or hoping to exercise power, status, prestige. He reminds them that what they are grasping for is how secular rulers act. Tyrants 'lord' their power over the people. It was hard for them to understand power in any other way. When a tyrant lorded his power over anyone in Jesus' time they were helpless to object. Jesus tells them it is not so among them. The power that Jesus has and wants to impart is the power of service - 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant'. 'Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'. Oh, Oh - this is starting to backfire on them.

They may not have had much interaction with tyrants and kings but they for sure saw the other end of the spectrum - the beggars, the blind, the afflicted who could only be at the extreme margins. They held a way too clear a picture of the last.

And while they are living in this world, this world of hierarchy, it is difficult to see it any other way. Power exists in having power over someone else. Servants and slaves exist if there is someone to order them about, someone to criticize, someone with their life in his or her hands. The notion that service or slavery might be the path to freedom; might be the way to step out of a tyrant ruled world into the Kingdom of God was impossible for the disciples to understand. How could they have power as servants, as slaves?

I must say that when I envision a life of service, life as a slave, I don't like the picture. I see it mostly in terms of relativity. As a servant, as a slave, practically everyone, is above me, and can order me around.

My first job was as a secretary at a Fortune 500 company. My desk was in an area with several other secretaries. Salesman and executives wore down the carpet walking through

our area to one hall or another, occasionally stopping to talk by our desks. I was surprised the first time one of them pushed aside papers on my desk and sat on it to continue his conversation. At first I paid attention to the conversation, feeling self conscious and imagining it must have had something to do with me. I was further embarrassed when the man sitting on my desk, feeling my gaze, turned a look of displeasure on his face. I felt like an eavesdropper at my own desk. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't do my work - he was sitting on it. It didn't take long for me to realize this was a common practice. I had learned shorthand and typing but I wasn't prepared for this, for being invisible.

It seems like such a small thing - but I felt my station in life keenly - I was a servant. And being a servant involved humiliation. Obviously this was nowhere near the bottom of the barrel but the feel of it is what I connect with being the least, the last. Being ground into the earth by the well shod feet of the most, the first, the great.

There was a time when I thought that was what Jesus meant when he talked about being a servant: being at the mercy of others, becoming a blank except for performing tasks. And that was the crux of it - of having my desk used as a seat, a salesman's back to me as if I didn't exist. That was what I couldn't take: being a blank, invisible, my oh-so-clever self being ignored. The challenge of being a servant was that it took away all my chances to be great, to be admired, to be seen.

I think this is what the disciples thought, too. In part because they were human and had egos, and in part because in the very next paragraph they try to keep a blind beggar who cries out for help away from Jesus. The disciples show themselves to feel superior as one of the in group. And if their conception of servanthood felt like my experience at Cabot Corporation they were clinging on pretty tightly to their status of one of Jesus' chosen.

So it was difficult to understand that what Jesus is asking of them brings freedom, brings meaning. It is difficult for us. Jesus steps completely out of the world of tyrants and slaves. The Son of Man came, he says, not to be served but to serve, to be last. He entreats the disciples to discover their greatness through service, through lastness, through the freedom of servanthood. The freedom of seeing the world not as a game where some win and some lose; not as a struggle of who is on top and who is on top of your desk - this freedom is the real freedom from the prison of self. As long as I was trying to get more privileges than my brother through cunning or even through merit, I was imprisoned in self, desiring the self-satisfaction of winning, the position of number one.

The opposite of that imprisonment is not the loss of self, but the freedom of forgetting self. Earlier in Mark Jesus restates this thus, for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it. It is the freedom of having your sense of self come from Jesus, come from your relationship with God and your service to God and God's creation. The freedom of loving others not because of who they are, not because of who you are - but because of who you serve.

This weekend was the Deacon and Ministry Team Retreat.

And out of a deck of random cards, I drew one labelled Service. Here's what it said:

You stop "using the Universe" to try to get what you want, and start asking Love to "use you." You offer All and what to be of service. Ironically, many desires become fulfilled, without grasping or manipulation.

That's the sermon in a few words – try it.