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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Mark 10:35-45

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

What is it we look for in a leader? It's a question we need to ask, especially as we get ready to vote in the midterm elections in just a couple of weeks. I dream about the possibility of a candidate who chooses not to attack his or her opponents and only speaks to the issues and what he or she would like to do about them.

I wonder if that campaign strategy is even possible. Would we see that kind of candidate as weak? Would they seem like they have no backbone and can't stand up to the demands of a public office? What is it we want from our leaders?

In our gospel reading today, the expectations of leadership in the world and leadership in the kingdom of God come face to face. The disciples James and John ask Jesus to do something for them. They want to be assigned the designated roles of Jesus' right and left hand men when he comes into glory.

Now we've been with Jesus and the disciples these past several weeks in Mark's gospel. We have heard his harsh and difficult words. He has told them about the suffering, rejection, and death he will soon face—and just before today's gospel passage they heard it for the third time.

He has taught them that the kingdom of God means seeing and blessing the vulnerable in the world, like little children. Followers of Jesus are called to live in ways that are honorable and to look past divisions in order to work with anyone who proclaims the love of Christ.

Peter, who is often seen as a leader among the disciples, has rebuked Jesus for some of these difficult words. Others have asked Jesus to explain his teachings that seem so hard to understand. And just before today's reading, in verse 32, Mark says that "those who followed Jesus were afraid."

Something about Jesus had attracted these fishermen, James and John, to follow him. We don't know what they were looking for or what they were expecting, but their request to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in glory indicates that at some point they were expecting Jesus to have a kind of power that they also wanted to be a part of.

We all want to be part of something important and even powerful. From the first children of Adam and Eve we have been a competitive creature. We want to know who is the fastest or the strongest. We measure popularity and beauty against one another. Even our possessions hold power—sometimes giving us power and sometimes holding power over us as we heard last week.

But in today's reading, James and John seem to have something else in mind when they ask Jesus this big favor. Let's hear again some of the passages from the last couple of chapters in Mark to see where they might be coming from.

- Jesus said, "...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed, and after three days rise again." (8:31)
- Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (8:38)
- "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (9:1)
- For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (9:41)
- But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (10:31)

In the midst of Jesus' difficult words, maybe the parts James and John focused on were these: Rise again...glory...power...reward...and the last will be first. Those who sit at Jesus' right and left hand will certainly share in some of that glory and power, won't they?

As so often happens, Jesus answers their question with a question. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" What do those images bring to mind for us?

The cup reminds us of the cup that Jesus will share with his disciples at the last supper before he goes to the cross. That cup of blessing is the cup Jesus calls all followers to return to again and again as we do at his table each time that we gather. When Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane after that last supper he prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36)

To drink the cup Jesus drinks is to give up power, at least the kind of power the world strives for. To drink the cup Jesus drinks is to give ourselves to caring for others, especially those the world does not care about. To drink the cup Jesus drinks means taking up the life of service that God places before us every day.

And are we able to be baptized with the baptism of Jesus? Baptism brings to mind the joy of the baptisms we celebrate together here, the welcoming of a new brother or sister into the family of God. Jesus' baptism by John was similar—the heavens opened, the Spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of God announced, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

Baptism is our entrance into a life in which we follow Jesus in the way of the cross. As we pass the font on our way to the meal we are reminded that we have entered into the suffering Jesus suffered for the sake of the world. In these waters we are called and

empowered every day to accompany those who are suffering around us with the sure and certain hope that these sufferings do not have the last word.

The resurrection of Jesus made good on his promises of glory and power and reward, but they are a kind of glory and power and reward the world does not know. God's rewards have to do with bringing healing out of brokenness, giving voice to the ignored and forgotten, and bringing life out of death.

So here we are, living in a world where the powers of competition and fame and death battle with the power of God to bring healing and hope and life. The world looks for winners and champions and experts who loom large over all the others who don't measure up.

"But not so among you," Jesus says. For us who drink this cup and are baptized in these waters Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

James and John wanted to be at Jesus' side probably to bask in his glory. But Jesus said those positions were meant for those for whom it has been prepared. On the cross it was two criminals who ended up at the right and left hand of Jesus. That was where Jesus' power was seen in the ultimate act of serving, the giving of his life for us.

As followers of Jesus we are meant to be an extension of Christ's powerful love for the world. We are to live lives of service as a church, as God's people, in our homes, and wherever we go. If you find yourself in a position of leadership, how might you lead with a heart to serve?

If you find yourself in a position where others are leading, how can you serve those around you? As we approach the upcoming elections, let us pray for the leaders who serve our communities, state, and nation.

Lord God, you call your people to honor those in authority. Help us elect trustworthy leaders. Guide us in the ways of Christ as we participate in wise decisions for our common life, and serve our neighbors in local communities. Bless the leaders of our land, that we may be at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(adapted from the *ELW Prayer Book for the Armed Forces*)