

Sermon Notes: Sunday, October 18th

We have in the Gospel reading from Mark today a reminder of Christ's sacrifice for us and the cost of discipleship for those that choose to follow him. These two points are cloaked in the excitability and confusion of James and John in their questioning of Jesus, along with their great demand of him for one big request. The request by James and John is reminiscent of Salome's request of Herod. But unlike Herod, Jesus counters the request with probing and provocative questions to redirect their energies.

Not only do we find Jesus again telling his Disciples and in particular, James and John of his eventual death, we get the Disciples once again not fully understanding Jesus' mission, they also fail to understand their own ministry. This message here, as you can surmise, is a message about what it means to follow Christ and what it means to serve others.

The woolly headed Disciples will learn just what they are called to once Jesus dies on the cross. They will learn they are called to a life of service, not a life exalted to where they will sit to the right or left of our Savior, like so many others had anticipated but service steeped in humility. This was not the anointed Davidic king most thought would arrive in glory and set the Jewish people back to their place of prominence and authority. Jesus was a radical departure from the expectations of most. In Jesus we have a new kind of leader not seen before and not after.

When the Disciples are called to join, they are invited to join him in his trials as well; this is what Jesus speaks of when he talks of the "cup" and of "baptism." The reference to the cup and to baptism is a connection to Old Testament sources, sources that symbolize, not fellowship and baptism, but rather, to divine wrath, to a cataclysmic deluge, and to profound ordeals.

Jesus makes clear- well perhaps not clear enough to the Disciples, that his eventual sacrifice on the cross will atone for the sins of the world. The Disciples along with us are encouraged to do is live out the legacy of Christ's ministry while

on earth—perhaps even suffering the persecution and injustice Jesus experienced.

The Good News is that through service we can carry on his message and extend hope to our contemporaries and those that will follow us. Being in worship together in this church helps insure and preserve the Good News to subsequent generations until that day.

In giving up things and giving into the challenge of serving, we are liberated. This is a message of reorientation for us today. The message here is also about what Christian identity is to look like; remembering that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve. A theologian from the recent past once said that greatness is measured in terms of service and the willingness to promote others' well-being and not our own uniqueness.

As you might be aware, we have entered into a month where stewardship is being promoted? So what does the message today have to do with stewardship? It is important and considered by many an unofficial season in the liturgical calendar of the Church. My initial reaction to being asked to talk about stewardship was, "Oh god, really?" You might feel that way too but I was encouraged that this was a good thing for a newly minted priest to have a handle on, to have under my belt. The lessons today have made me think about my new understating of stewardship and the importance of giving.

I thought differently about stewardship and pledging when I was a member of a congregation, sitting like you in the pews. Giving to the church for me was often more about tax planning than thinking about the importance my contributions to the church would make. My mentality was rather clinical and perhaps a little "transactionally" focused. It was much too much a businesslike affair and it became clear there was an absence of heart in it all.

Don't get me wrong, there is no issue with giving to the church this way and thinking about the tax consequences, it is rational and prudent. Where I found fault in myself was in the intentionality of my giving. This eventually changed, as my life changed, and as I became more intimately involved in the life of my parish.

My time in service to others tracked with my giving. For me, in the act of service it all made more sense, not just seeing where my dollars went but also through the validation that human contact can provide when in service to others. My invitation to join a team of people to go down to Honduras to build a daycare facility helped reorient me and reorient how I gave. I learned to give with my heart.

Today I sit in a different place having migrated towards the altar. I am in away on the other side of this pledging, stewardship, offering, contribution equation. And so, let me express my gratitude for what you do for the parish in terms of your financial contributions, your pledges, your fellowship and your care for others. I am now the beneficiary of your life and labor. On this subject all I can say is thank you. With your spirit of generosity, the love of my family and with the help of God I am standing here in service to you.

“Let us with gratitude present our offerings and oblations of our life and labor unto the Lord.”

I like this because when we give our offerings, be it food for Beverly Bootstraps or to the collection plate we are giving a bit of our life when we make an offering, we give a little of our labor. On a Sunday when the collection plate floats around I’m reminded of what you all do for a living or have done.

I think about the sacrifices you make to be here on a Sunday, the negotiations and tradeoffs you make to bring yourself, possibly your family to Church, the challenges you face from 9-5, Monday through Friday or Saturday and into Sunday to provide for yourself and for those in your life. I know a little about what some of you do, as well as your life journeys, your challenges, your successes, and your joys. I too know the joys and challenges of giving.

My past work life continues to inform my present one. I have had the opportunity to serve in various fields and in various capacities in my work life. It has been my privilege to take care of three great life assets, for lack of a better word. I have been charged with educating other people’s children; I have

managed other people's money and financial assets and now in my role as Curate, serving in the priestly duties in the care of people's souls.

These three areas of my life have a common theme. They all connect to this concept of service. All walks of life are or can be centered on other people in service to them whether it is educational, financial and so on. We are all called to serve by Jesus in the Gospel message by Mark...This is one of my take-a ways from this season of stewardship.

Returning to the Scriptures, there is much to this gospel reading that speaks to me. In particular what resonates most with me is this concept of service, a radical concept, in light of the challenges of living in a world, where "we" are encouraged to think about self-promotion, advancement, and personal achievement as principal goals and the measurement of a life worth living.

The questioning by James and John speaks to how they are shaped by their own environment and culture. The Disciples lack of insight once again aid in making the point that the goal in life is not the achievements that we think will place us at the right or left of Christ but something greater and less tangible. The challenge for me and I suspect others is in how to live a life that is not ruled by societal rules and expectations, it is in living into the life and the expectations that our Lord has for us.

This leads me to another dimension of the call to "service," or what it means to live a life in service to others. When we lose ourselves in service we will find ourselves living more abundantly than ever before. The other dimension I will share with you is found in a passage from the Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A City built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

The point of service to others is about letting your light shine bright! We serve, which is the physical act, being a bright light for others to see. Just as we should

not hide or not engage our talents for the betterment of others so too are we to share the Good News in word. We are called to have the confidence and courage to profess our faith. We are called to couple our actions with words of acknowledgment and praise.

All this means we need to act publically and not be afraid of giving credit for whence our actions are derived from. We engage in acts of giving and charity because they are right and good but we also do so because we are in service to God.

We sometimes need to be overt, to not shy about where the source of this light originates. We should be known for the works of our heart and where this heart work emanates from. In doing so, we give glory to God. This is important and not to be overlooked or dismissed for any awkwardness or discomfort felt in doing so.

The work of the Church, the work you do, the work you fund here at St John's and elsewhere is a fulfillment of what Jesus is trying to communicate to his Disciples. We are instructed in the Gospel today to seek to serve and not be served. We are instructed to be active in our faith, to act out a faith that is grounded in the love of the "other" no matter how unlovable or difficult a person or persons may be.

We are also instructed through the words of Matthew to emanate the light of knowledge found in Christ's salvific gift to everyone. We are called to not shy away from acknowledgment and proclamation of the Good News and the source of this light and life.

Again, before I close, thank you for your service to others. With gratitude I thank you for your financial generosity, your generosity of time and your generosity of spirit that allows me to serve you and to serve others in the name of Christ our Lord.

Amen