

Matthew 20:17-28
(Isaiah 66:1-2; Philippians 2:5-11)
“A Call to Mission: Serve!”

Introduction

In our gospel text we see the raw ambition, the lust for position and power, of Jesus' disciples, James and John, who actually *get their mother* to go to Jesus and ask him to give them the places of honor at his right and left hand. The other disciples show their ambition as well in their anger at the brothers for trying to rob them of any chance of occupying the places of honor. How strange that they could have spent three years in intimate fellowship with Jesus and still have had so little sense of what he had come to show us of God's kingdom and of God's heart.

Yet I wonder how many of us here this morning have walked a long road with Jesus, studying the Scriptures, attending worship services, Bible studies and mission conferences, considering all these things and yet who, truth be told, have walked this road because we are actually seeking something other than God's kingdom and righteousness. Perhaps what we really seek – without ever realizing it – is our success, our place, our position in God's kingdom. Like James and John, we believe that Jesus is Messiah, and we hope that knowing him will be the key to our getting what we really want from life.

Others of us here today may wonder what this is all about and whether any of it is even true. But whoever you are, the message is the same: Jesus still calls across the years for us who hear his voice to follow him. But what does that mean? Perhaps the best definition of a disciple of Jesus is this: We learn from Jesus as we follow him in loving, trusting obedience, expressed in self-sacrificial service.

But talk about loving service of God and others still leaves most of us with no clear idea what it involves. Are we simply talking about warm feelings? How am I to command my emotions to feel something I don't feel? How can we command our hearts? And how are we to love people whom we don't even like? And, furthermore, isn't the world the enemy of the Christian? Doesn't the apostle John write in his first letter, “Do not love the world or the things in the world? If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15)? Why should I offer myself in service to the world around me?

The foundation of creation and salvation is the love of God for all he has made: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). And the summary of all God's commandments to us is simply this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The One whom we worship and serve came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). So as we prepare for this year's global mission conference, I want us to be as clear as we can be as to the nature of the four mission challenges we give one another each year: this morning, we focus on the call to serve.

Body

1. Why is the call to serve crucial? By nature, we desire to be served rather than to serve, we want honor and glory (20:20-21).

Three times in Matthew's gospel, in chapters 16, 17 & 20, Jesus tells his disciples that he is on his way to Jerusalem to face death by crucifixion. Each time, his disciples refuse to believe his words and instead seek their own glory. The first time, Peter says, "This shall never happen to you" (16:22). The second time, we read, "they were greatly distressed" (17:23), and after consulting together, "the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" (18:1). Now, as Jesus once again points them to the cross, James and John come to him with their mother asking for the seats of honor at his right and left hand.

It is easy for us to read the gospels and wonder how his disciples could be so obdurate and obtuse. But I wonder whether we don't do better by seeing ourselves in them. How many of us seek the Lord daily for ways to humble ourselves under his mighty hand so that he will lift us up? How often do we seek, not our will, but the Lord's will? How often do we wait on him to make our plans, pursue our goals, or shape our dreams? Don't we far more often seek him in order to get what we want for ourselves and for those we love?

In a very real sense, this is quite understandable as those made in God's image and destined for glory. We were made for this, but the dislocation at the center of reality occurred when humanity sought its glory apart from the path God had set for it. "Has God really said that? Go ahead and do it and you will be like God knowing good and evil." Thus temptation always comes and tells us that there is another way to the glory for which we were created, another way than the way given in God's Word.

But the other way leads to alienation from God and from one another, it makes us, not divine, but like the beasts that perish. It is the source of conflict and violence, hatred and war. And it leads us to see other people – even those closest to us – as existing to fulfill our wants and needs. It makes us desire to be served rather than to serve, to use up the lives of others, rather than to give our lives for others. But self-centered worship of self is the way that leads to death, and sacrificial service is the way that leads to life. Why?

2. Why is self-sacrificial service inescapable for a Christian? The only way to glory is the way of the cross (20:22-23).

Jesus links the call to service to the way of the cross. He answers the brothers, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They reply, "We are able." And Jesus says, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for

whom it has been prepared by my Father” (20:22f). What is Jesus talking about? What does this mean?

The Bible speaks of two cups, a cup of God’s wrath and a cup of God’s blessing. Each of us will drink from one or the other. Jesus was facing the cross, where he would suffer and die in our place, taking the punishment and death we deserve for our rebellion against the Lord of life, against the source of all that is good and true and lovely, and triumph over the curse, destroying death’s power over those who are his and uniting us to him in his death and in his victory over death.

Thus, the night of his betrayal, he said to his disciples, “Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). They would have heard and understood his biblical allusion from the Psalms: “For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs” (Psalm 75:8). So, too, John in the Revelation describes the outpouring of the bowls of God’s wrath upon the wicked. Jesus drank the cup of wrath, God’s punishment of sin, so that we who are in him might drink the cup of blessing, signified in the Lord’s Supper, that points back to the cross and ahead to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6f).

James and John do not realize that they have requested to be crucified at Jesus right and left hand, so he answers, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” (20:22). How often have we prayed, “Lord Jesus, whatever it takes, I surrender all to you, if only you will use me for your glory and for the salvation of those you’ve entrusted to me,” without perhaps beginning to understand what we ask? “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” Yet, we should pray that prayer daily, because Jesus drank once and for all the cup of wrath so that we who are in him may drink the cup of blessing.

So Jesus says, “You will drink my cup.” Not at the cross, but in the years to come, James would be one of the first Christians killed for following Jesus, struck down with the sword at King Herod’s command (Acts 12:2). And John would be the last of the Twelve, old and banished to the prison island of Patmos, where he would receive the Revelation. Where do *we* begin the way of the cross as those who are more than conquerors through him who loves us?

3. Where do we begin? Union with Christ leads to likeness to Christ. Believing in Christ leads to obedience to Christ (20:24-28).

There is something we must remind ourselves each day, best summarized by the apostle Paul in his Galatian letter: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). As I have often said over the years, this should be the central truth that a Christian rehearses every morning on first awakening, and recollects every night before

sleeping. It is from our union with Christ that every blessing of salvation, every theological, ethical and missional implication, springs to life. It is all of grace. And, therefore, it calls us to glad obedience, marked by self-sacrificial service.

So if we are to grow up into Christ, who has joined us to himself in his death and in his victory over death, and if his path to glory still goes straight through the cross, and especially if he himself has said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24), then we must ask, Where do we begin? And he answers that question in our text:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (20:25f).

Our culture is still marked – in spite of many leadership books’ claims to the contrary – by a leadership style of rule. Even within the church, the idea of being in charge dominates churches, both small and large, and probably most church splits are not theological in nature, but are power struggles. It should not be so.

Jesus calls us to servant leadership, even as he who is Lord of all humbled himself, laid aside his lordly prerogatives, and took the form of a servant. “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This is the key to joining him on mission. When we cultivate a servant’s heart and seek by grace the way of the cross, all the rest flows naturally: praying, going, serving, giving, it is the life of Christ, who gave his life “as a ransom for many.”

Conclusion

What difference does this make? All the difference in the world! God turns this world’s values upside down: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). The way to the crown leads first to the cross for both Jesus and his disciples. His mission is carried out under the shadow of that cross, its shame and its glory, its pain and its triumph. He has entrusted the completion of his mission to us, his people, and our joy and our salvation is in following him toward that day that is surely coming, when at last, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).