

“The Low Road”

Sermon by Rev. Glenn Brumbaugh

Pentecost 22, Year B

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Hebrews 5:1-10 *NSRV* / Mark 10:35-45 *NIV*



Donald Meichenbaum, one of the magazine *American Psychologist's*

ten most influential psychotherapists,

tells the story of the time that his car was struck by lightning

while he was driving.

Once he was safe at home, Meichenbaum

began to share his ordeal with his teenage son,

expecting at least some small degree of sympathy.

Instead his son interrupted, “Dad, let's go buy a lottery ticket.

They say the chances of being hit by lightning
are like the chances of winning the lottery.”

While this may be a light story of a typical teenager's self-absorbtion,
it's not such an uncommon way of thinking, is it?

When many people see a chance to “get ahead” or get a bigger piece of the pie,
however they define that, they often have a desire to “go for it.”

In our Gospel story today, James and John are behaving every bit as selfishly
as the son in our lightning story.

They've been strategizing, and they ask Jesus
for the highest places of honor in his kin-dom to come.

They're not worried about the other ten, or thinking of anybody but themselves.

And when the rest hear what is transpiring, they come clamoring,
angry that those two are trying to outdo them.

Now on the surface, we could brush this off as just another example
of these often bumbling, clueless followers just not getting it.

But it's helpful to give a little more thought to what is going on.

In the verses preceding today's reading, for the third and final time in Mark's Gospel,
Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem
to be arrested and put to death.

As we've seen earlier in Mark, when Jesus talks like this,
the disciples get uneasy and worried.

So much so that Peter gets rebuked by Jesus for, in effect,
telling him to shut up about that stuff.

So after this third time, immediately James and John

seek to ensure they have a place of privilege in what is coming up.

Our initial reaction is to see that request as ambitious and selfish,

and it is both of those things, but what if it's also a reaction to fear?

The fear of what is about to happen to their rabbi, their messiah,

and the fear of what will happen to them if what Jesus just said

really comes to pass.

Will they suffer the same fate as Jesus because they follow him?

They want to make sure that whatever transpires, in the end they come out on top.

The problem is, how they define “being on top.”

They are a product of their status-based culture.

To be “on top” was to have the highest status and honor among your peers.

It meant that you had the seat of privilege at any event you went to.

People moved out of your way and clamored over each other

to serve you.

It was all about what other people thought of you.

Did you live a pious life

that resulted in riches and blessings being bestowed on you?

Did you wear the finest clothes

and live a life of honor in your well-appointed lavish residence?

Were you a popular and sought after guest

at dinners and other functions?

These are the kinds of attributes that conveyed success and more importantly, security.

If you fit into this mold, you didn't have to worry about your safety in any way.

If you were with the “in” crowd, the government liked you.

You didn't worry about going hungry, or losing your property.

These disciples saw being Jesus' favored followers

as a path to all those things that would eliminate the need to be afraid.

And these weren't bad men. They were devoted followers of Jesus.

They wanted to embrace the good news he shared.

John Calvin wrote 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 that those who follow Christ end up having a different object in

view from what they ought to have.

These disciples let their fear get the best of them until their focus shifted

from caring for others, to worrying only about themselves,

even at the expense of their fellow disciples.

They just can't get their heads out of “this world” thinking,

even when it come to who Jesus really is.

With all this “kin-dom” talk, they are translating Jesus

into the worldly messiah they've all been waiting for:

a man of power, who will rule with his own elite at his side,

neatly fitting into the status and privilege patterns

that are so much an ingrained part of the world around them.

From that perspective, they are the bumbling disciples that just don't get it.

Jesus tells them that they don't understand what they are really seeking,

that they don't really understand what it means to share in his baptism,

and drink from his cup.

His baptism and his cup lead to salvation for sure,

but it is obtained through pain and crucifixion.

The ironic part is they still persist saying they will share in those,

and historical evidence does suggest

that they indeed ended up being martyred for their faith.

Jesus yet again tries to set them straight on what the kin-dom is and isn't.

It isn't like the world they know.

He points out that those whom they seek to emulate,

those with power and prestige, are tyrants over them.

Their self-interest only benefits themselves, to the detriment of others.

And the disciples are those others,

those who suffer and struggle to eke out a living

while those in power benefit from their suffering.

His kin-dom is the opposite of what they seek from the world's perspective.

It's what you do for others before yourself that matters.

You gain status not by being the guest of honor, but by being the servant of all.

Humility, not pride, is the value of importance.

It's a group effort instead of a me effort.

But the clear message is that it's not about our individual success.

It's about how we work to ensure others are lifted up with us.

So what about us?

What does success mean to us as individuals, as a culture, as a church?

Has that much really changed in 2000 years?

Who has the status and prestige in our culture?

I would wager that many of us have thought of how nice it would be
to win one of those big lotteries, like this weekend's Mega-Millions.

I'm sure our initial thought would be all the things we could buy with that money:
a nice house, reliable car, have a nice nest egg, take good trips
and not have to worry about how we'll get by.

Though if we're really honest, those thoughts \
often lead to fantasies of really nice houses, expensive cars,
and a huge nest egg.

I'm sure everyone in here would be generous as well,
but when we think of what success and prestige mean,
our minds still seem stuck in the same mindset as James and John.

Those individuals we want to emulate, and who often become those in leadership,
are those who have acquired wealth and power,
who are able to sit in today's seats of honor
at the sporting and other premier events of our culture.

Like James and John, we see those people as being secure,
and not having to be afraid or worry.

Likewise in our churches, isn't it our nature
to be jealous of the booming church down the street,
the one with hundreds of members
who have the nice building and healthy budget.

The ones whose services reach many more on the radio and TV.

They don't have to worry about paying the bills or meeting the budget.

And then there's our culture. What do we value there?

Do we like to be second rate or do we like to see ourselves as top of the heap?

Do we want other countries to bow to our interests?

Do we like our leaders to be calm, caring servants

who's primary concern is the welfare of all peoples

or do we like to see tough guys

who seek to get the most for us with out regards for others?

We have fears and insecurities much like John and James.

It's still a scary world out there.

It gets more and more expensive to live

and one has to work harder and harder to keep one's job.

There's violence in the world to worry about too.

We want to have our own sense of security.

That's a perfectly natural human instinct.

But how we get that security is the key point that Jesus is making.

We won't get it by seeking prestige and status

in whatever arena of our lives we feel insecure.

It isn't through the power structures of this world that we will find that stability.

This world's system is based on winners and losers.

For every winner, there are often many losers.

Our focus is to serve the least of these, those for whom the system fails to lift up.

Many of the fears we have,

result from those who are excluded taking desperate measures

to try to change the balance of things.

When we take the initiative, when we serve others, we mitigate that imbalance.

Charles Swindoll uses the illustration

that being a servant comes down to basin theology.

"Remember what Pilate did when he had the chance to acquit Jesus?

He called for a basin and washed his hands of the whole thing.

But Jesus, the night before His death, called for a basin

and proceeded to wash the feet of the disciples.

It all comes down to basin theology: Which one will you use?"

We, like the disciples have a choice.

We can think about "me", or we can think about "we."

We can take the high road to bigger and better things for ourselves,

or the lower road that winds longer but leads to a better life for all.

May we choose wisely. Amen.

