

“Cup-Holders”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 18, 2009

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Isaiah 53:4-12

Mark 10:32-45

Having saved enough money from a couple summers spent mowing lawns and being frugal with our allowance, my older brother – who was about to turn sixteen – and I approached my father saying that we wanted to buy a car. Since my dad would be paying for our insurance, he told us to look for something safe and reliable. But, my brother was friends with some guys who were amateur off-roaders, which meant that they liked to drive through creeks, hopefully without getting stuck; and up and down hills, preferably without flipping over. In the end, we somehow convinced our father to let us purchase a Jeep: an old CJ-7 soft-top that while it did run, was hardly the practical first car that dad had intended.

Because we had pooled our money together, and since the age and condition of the Jeep kept the purchase price low, we had money left over to make some modifications. It needed much bigger tires, we thought, and a lift kit to increase its ground clearance. We installed a full roll-cage – just in case – and some heavy-duty fog lights to make it look cool. Of course, as any teen-age boy knows, it needed a well-amplified stereo which, in those days, required more room than the standard dash-board would allow. And so, we built a stereo console in between the two front seats and inserted two cup-holders on top.

You remember those days before cup-holders, don't you? In my parents' cars, we had those plastic, removable cup-holders that had to be hung from the doors and fell off at every bump or sharp turn. In the Jeep, you could just put your drink in the holder and go, no worries. We had what we thought was the best car – which was our ambition all along – with the biggest tires and the loudest stereo. And so we went, through the widest creeks and deepest mud we could find until of course, we would inevitably get stuck and have to call home for help.

It's with almost that same kind of teen-age ambition that James and John – the two sons of Zebedee – approach Jesus and say to him: “we want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Can you imagine how, if we were Jesus and heard this from two of our followers, we would have responded? Something along the lines of: “you want me to do for you whatever you ask of me, think again.” And not only do they make this outrageous request, they do it behind the backs of the other ten disciples. “Give us the highest seats of honor, one on your left and one on your right,” James and John say to Jesus, “and forget about those other guys.”

Almost comically, this request comes immediately after Jesus tells his disciples, for a third time, in graphic detail, what will happen to him when they finally reach Jerusalem. Yes, he

will rise again, but only after enduring the brutality of the crucifixion. But, what seems to be on the mind of James and John is their future, their place of honor, what they can get – even if they have to ask for it in a backhanded and deceitful way.

“It is easy to dismiss the two brothers for being brazenly opportunistic, jockeying for position when, at the very least, they ought to be more discreet. But Jesus knows that James and John only voice what is on the minds of the others. The apostles all want the payoff that comes from following Jesus. They all have their eyes on the prize.”¹

Once again the disciples seem eager to have a place, a seat on the throne. It is not unlike the time when they climbed the mountain with Jesus and saw him standing with Moses and Elijah, the heroes of the Old Testament. The disciples wanted to build tents – or tabernacles – and stay there in that place of honor. But, throughout the New Testament, people with “place” are contrasted with people “on the way.” While Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, the disciples instead want to sit down in the high places of honor.

The disciples have their minds on power, not on serving and certainly not on dying an inglorious death. The Zebedee brothers continue to believe that the systems of power that exist in the world are good, but that the wrong people are in those places of power. They think this is a game of “king of the hill” and that, with Jesus, they can make it to the top of the hill.

But the reign of God is so different from our conventional way of doing things and our conventional beliefs about what is best. “This much is for sure,” Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “whether we can make sense of it or not, serving is how we transform the world. The power that God gives us in abundance is the power to serve; and it’s the strongest stuff in the world.”²

Jesus does not refuse the request of James and John, but tells them instead that they really do not know what they are asking. Can they drink from the same cup that he will drink? When, only a short time later, Jesus gives them the cup to drink at the Last Supper, they are invited to join him in his glory, but also in his suffering; the cup that he prays might pass from him while in the Garden of Gethsemane. In becoming cup-holders, they join him in communion – literally in common union – but also agree that by accepting the cup they let go of their ambitions about the self: for glory and safety and success. The cup becomes a sign that they will go where he goes, and seek to do what he does, rather than looking only to preserve or promote themselves.

Jesus then talks to the disciples about greatness. To the gentiles, greatness is about the ambition of the self. It is like a game of king of the hill. Those who stand at the top have all the power and all the glory. The way of the world equates greatness with being catered to and set apart. The successful are those powerful enough to always get their own way.

¹ Paul Wadell in *Christian Century*, Oct. 6, 2009

² As quoted by Kate Huey in *Weekly Seeds*, October 2009.

But, “Jesus challenges us to picture greatness differently. Those who want to share in Jesus’ glory must be fit with a greatness that comes from embracing a way of life that seems to have everything backward...In the Christian life, greatness is measured in serving, in expending ourselves in love, sacrifice, and generosity with others. Honor is not found in titles or privilege or celebrity or wealth, but in goodness and humility. In the strange world of the reign of God, power is not a matter of ruling over others, but of living on their behalf.”³

Just as Jesus loved and welcomed his disciples when they were blind to their own ambition, he loves and welcomes us as well. And yet, he also challenges us to understand what it is we really seek. It’s true that we have to work hard, but do we truly see the direction we are then led? It’s true that if we don’t stand up for ourselves and our families, then there’s a chance that no one else will. Jesus asks not whether we can make it to the top, but whether we can drink from his cup.

A college chaplain once lamented that so few students were attracted to Sunday chapel services. “Go easy on yourself,” said one of the students. This is a very selective school with very bright students. I think most of us are smart enough to figure out that if they we gave our lives to Christ, he would only make our lives more difficult. I think it’s amazing that you get as many students come to Jesus as you do.”⁴

Jesus said, “the cup that I drink you will drink; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Immediately after this passage in Mark, Jesus and the disciples enter into the town of Jericho and encounter a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside. Although he has a journey to Jerusalem to complete, Jesus stops and, as the text says, “stood still.” He then asks a question of this blind beggar that is jarringly similar to the request that had just been made by James and John. Jesus says, “what do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus responds, in words that are fitting for any follower of Jesus, “I want to see.” And after having been granted his sight, Bartimaeus does what true disciples do, “he followed Jesus on the way.”

Members of the body of Christ, greatness in the eyes of God is not about having power and authority, but about being faithful. It requires the opening of our eyes to the goodness and beauty of God’s creation, but also the recognition that the world we inhabit has hidden much of God’s splendor, and silenced the voice of testimony to its creator. These are the things that can be rediscovered – unearthed – not by finding our own seat in glory, not by pursuing our own ambitions, but by becoming servants to all. May God help us as we seek to extend to creation and all of its inhabitants the love of God in Christ’s name. AMEN.

³ Paul Wadell, *Blogging Toward Sunday*, “A Scandalous Life”

⁴ William Willimon, “Good News?”