

“But It Is Not So Among You”

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Job 38:1-7, 34-41 Mark 10:35-45

Some of the poorest countries in the world have very wealthy leaders. I read that the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, has more than 200 foreign bank accounts. He is estimated to be worth 5 billion dollars, while many of his people live on the edge of starvation. The Democratic Republic of Congo is sitting on resources worth trillions of dollars, yet it still has the poorest per capita income in the world. The list goes on. All over the world, a handful of people take what they can get away with, while the masses of people have barely enough to survive.

Maybe it's just human nature for people to look out for themselves and forget about everyone else. Certainly we do it in this country as well. Look at the millionaires and billionaires who do all they can to avoid paying taxes. They try to get their way by arguing that everyone will benefit if they get to keep more for themselves. But we know that's a lie. Rarely do the poor benefit from the rich getting richer. Still, we are all tempted to be greedy, whether it be for time, attention or money. It's in our nature to take care of ourselves and try to get as much as we can.

Jesus taught a different way to live. In the story Eulalia read from Mark today, Jesus said, “You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...”

Now this does NOT mean that suddenly the slaves and servants will get to boss everyone else around, that there will be a new dictator from the lower classes, who can help himself to whatever he wants. And Jesus did not say that everyone will be equal. When James and John asked Jesus to give them positions of honor in heaven, that is, to sit on either side of him, Jesus did NOT say there are no seats of honor in heaven. He just said, you don't know what it takes to get there.* You don't get there by force, by jumping ahead of everyone else, or being the richest or most powerful. You get there by drinking the cup Jesus drank, the cup of suffering, and by being baptized with the baptism with which Jesus was baptized. He was talking about his death. “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life to set others free.”

Life in God's kingdom is not about private privilege and gain. Jesus did not give his life so that we wouldn't have to give ours. He gave his life, and called us to follow, to lay down our lives for others.

Today we call our political leaders “public servants.” What would it be like if they all used their power and authority to actually serve the people, rather than promote or enrich themselves? We pay our celebrities and movie stars millions of dollars and plaster their pictures everywhere. What would it be like if we were to care just as much

about our soldiers, our school teachers and nurses, our home health aides and cleaning crews? Clayton Kershaw gets paid 30 million dollars to pitch for the Dodgers. Why can't the concession workers and ticket takers get more than minimum wage? What if we were to start measuring greatness and glory by how well people served others, and what sacrifices they were willing to make?

I think most of you understand this. Nobody comes here to get fame or power. Most of you are here to find meaning and inspiration for your life, and to be part of what God is doing in the world. And you have a wonderful spirit of service. We don't boss each other around here or throw fits to get our own way. You care for each other and give generously of your time and talents and money.

How much time and money do we have to give? It's different for every person. If you are working full time and have young children at home, you may not have the time to visit someone in the hospital. But other people can and do. You may not have the talent to sing in the choir, or the strength to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. But others do. You may be struggling financially and can't give thousands of dollars to the church. But you give what you are able to give.

We don't have to do whatever people ask of us, or let others take advantage of us. Jesus didn't do everything people asked of him either. There were some things he *could* not do, like guarantee someone a place in glory. And there were some things he *would* not do, like turn around, just because the disciples were worried or anxious about going into Jerusalem. Jesus knew he was going to die in Jerusalem. He laid down his life, not because he had to, or was forced into it. He gave freely, of his own will. It didn't always bring him joy, but it was the path to glory.

When James and John asked Jesus to give them a seat in his glory, Jesus asked them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" That cup was the cup of suffering and death. But Jesus wasn't asking James and John to die with him on the cross. That was Jesus' cup. He was asking them to stay with him, through trials, humiliation and death, and then to take the path that God called them to in their own lives. And for James, that meant being martyred many years later.

What is the cup we are called to drink today? It might be to give up a job rather than do something you believe is wrong. Your cup might be to rearrange your life to help a teenager in trouble, or to care for an aging parent. You don't have to look for the cup. It comes to you. And for most people there is not one big cup, but many little cups along the way, many little chances and choices to seek the good of others, to be a servant, or stand against evil and stand up for what is good and right, and bring glory to God. As we face different challenges in life, we choose what kind of path we will walk in. We can choose to be stingy or generous. We can choose to seek our own comfort and security. Or we can choose to welcome others and help them. We don't have to do whatever anyone wants us to do. But we are called to be different from the tyrants and rulers who lord it over others. As Jesus said, "It is not to be so among you."

Today we begin the stewardship season, where we talk about how we use our resources at church, the resource of this building, the resource of the people here, and the financial resources we have. We were blessed this year with a huge gift from an elderly former member who passed away, leaving us money in her will. We are also blessed by the on-going generosity of our current members. How do we use these resources? Are we just collecting money for ourselves, or do we make a difference in the lives of the people who come here? Do we make a difference in our community and in the world, helping to spread the news of God's love?

As we ask these questions of the church, we also ask them of you. How do you use the resources God has given you? How do you use your talents and skills? How do you use your car and your home? How do you spend your time and money? Are you caught up in a cycle of self-promotion or self-indulgence? Or are you free to give, and to live in life-giving relationships with others? According to Jesus, that's what it's all about, that's how it is to be among us.

So may we be followers of Jesus, the Son of Man, who gave his life to set others free, and rise to the challenge to love and serve our neighbors. Amen.

* Credit for this idea to Alastair Roberts, "The Politics of Service," at www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-service-mark-1035-45.