

Daniel Tate Sermon, October 20, 2024, Sunday, St Ambrose, Foster City, CA

Lectionary: Isaiah 53:4-12, Psalm 91:9-16, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

In the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

There are no stupid questions! That's one of the many lessons in our readings today. John and James ask Jesus, "can one of us sit at your right hand and one on your left in your glory?" Maybe they think that they're asking if they can be princes, or royal advisors, or maybe next in line to take over his throne. Who knows. But, it's kind of hard to believe. They are acting like competitive little kids. And like little kids, they're thinking that they're getting first dibs, beating out the rest of the disciples. Then the rest of the disciples hear it and then they get all mad. But Jesus takes it in stride. He doesn't mind. It's the continuing of a conversation he's been having with them about his future. He is teaching them. They don't know what they're asking.

Another lesson is about listening. The disciples haven't been listening. Jesus has been explaining, patiently teaching them all through Mark Chapter Ten. First, he gave them the lesson, that they need to be like children, have open, beginners' minds. Then they saw how he dealt with the rich man who needed to be first in wealth and could not let it go. He said that the first will be last and the last will be first. And so here are John and James asking if they can be first. They haven't heard. He's not going to be an earthly king like they imagine. I can see how they might be confused about Jesus' future though. They have witnessed many miracles; He heals the sick, makes the blind see, walks on water, controls the storms, brings the dead back to life. They saw Jesus' talking with Moses and Elijah on the mountain top transfiguration. This is someone who seems to have all power and he's chosen them to be their friend.

But they haven't heard. Three times Jesus predicts his death in Mark, and each time the disciples don't get it and are afraid to ask about it. It's hard to be a good listener, and sometimes it's hard to ask questions for fear of looking ignorant or fear, knowing what the answer will be. If they had asked what he meant when he said that he was going to die, they might not have been so shocked when it happened. All questions are good. It reveals where one hasn't listened deeply or understood, and pushes forward a dialogue to bring greater understanding. Even though he got irritated with them when they tried to tell the children to go away, Jesus usually is very patient. It takes time to learn. It takes time to teach.

Then there's the lesson of being of service. The disciples want Jesus to be king over them, and they seem to think that they want to rule that way too with him but he reminds them of some of the Gentiles who want to have strong leaders rule them, that he is not like that, that they are not like that. Jesus helps them see their better selves. But why is being of service a better way to lead? The true way to really lead. It seems counter intuitive. To me it has to do with accepting reality. It's easy to put leaders up on pedestals, thinking that, okay, they know what they're doing, so let's put them in charge. Yes, each of us have certain skills that others don't have. But a leader can't lead without help. The chief executive needs their executive secretary. But often, the secretary knows more than the boss does, and they have to ask the secretary for information.

Who is really in charge? If the boss tries to lead the company in a way that the employees don't want, they will quit. Who is serving who? In baseball, it seems like the pitcher is the leader and the catcher serves him. He has the ball. Nothing happens until he throws the ball. And yet the catcher has to catch it, make sure that it doesn't go to the backstop, and he has to throw it back so the game can go on. Most of the time the catcher signals to the pitcher what kind of pitch he wants him to pitch. Sometimes the pitcher shakes him off, and wants to do it his way. So, there's a dialogue back and forth. Who is serving who? Both are serving each other.

In the hospital, we now have new chaplain students starting a new year, and for the past month I was asked to be a mentor to some of them. They would shadow me as I visited a patient, and then later in the day, I would shadow them. After each visit, we would de-brief, asking ourselves what went well, and what could have been done better, what the grow edges are. Reviewing strengths and weaknesses. We call it, Action, Reflection, New Action.

Some of the students are tempted to think I know it all, but I don't. I do know some stuff, and share my experience, but I am also learning from them. Every student knows something that I don't. In one instance there was a Hindu patient near end of life, and his large family was there grieving, along with many medical staff working to comfort him. It turns out that the new student knew more about the Hindu faith than I did, and before we went to the visit, we both got some advice from a Hindu volunteer who knew more than both of us. I shadowed her. There were so many unknowns about how to proceed. But we did well, and were a supportive presence for the patient, family, and staff. The family taught us what they needed. In chaplaincy, the patients lead the visit. You listen and wait and through conversation and empathy, the patient tells you what they need. We don't help or fix, because helping implies dominance, an up/down, over/under relationship. Instead, we serve. Nurses serve. Doctors serve. This is what Jesus is talking about. When all of us are serving each other, we are living in a world of equality, we are living in the Kingdom of God that Jesus describes if we come at life as little children, with an open beginner's mind. There are some that believe that students should not be spoiled, they should get out there and do it on their own, learn the hard way. To me that's a kind of bullying.

Our Isaiah reading about the suffering servant shows the result of that kind of world view. Often, the passage is interpreted as a foreshadowing of Jesus coming into the world. Christians have used Isaiah 53 to predict that the messiah would suffer and die for others.

Another way to look at the passage, is that it's a suffering human being surviving and transcending their own situation to serve as an example of hope for others in their suffering. It's inspiring.

The suffering servant in Isaiah can be seen as representing an individual, a group, or a prophet. I like to look at it as groups today, those who are sick and dying, those who live with mental illnesses, those who have been slaves, or indentured servants, or those who are prisoners.

Ask. There are no stupid questions. It takes courage to ask for what we need, even if it's not really what we want or need, even if it's the wrong thing to ask for. Asking questions, even when embarrassing, can bring us to understanding and connection.

Listen. We need to slow down and really listen to each other. What are our friends, our partners, our loved ones, really saying beneath the surface? Listen to not just words, but to feelings, and what's not being said.

Serve. Jesus' mission statement found in Luke, chapter 4, is to bring good news to the poor, to release to the captives, and give recovery of sight to the blind, physical and spiritual, to give freedom to the oppressed, and to bring rest, renewal, redemption, reconciliation and forgiveness, and redistribution. This is the ideal of leadership that we can follow, when being of service.

Being of service is being selfish, but in a good way, a form of self-love. Eventually, we will all find ourselves in need. We all will get sick and die, and will need to be served. Being of service is a way of giving back before we ourselves eventually need to receive.