

“A Big But” – Mark 10:35-45 – Oct 22/06

Well, the work continues. Both here at the church and at school the work continues. It's been another busy and interesting week in the office, and the homework continues to be overwhelming in my Korean language class at UBC. In addition to that, the final draft of my thesis proposal needs to be submitted to the Committee on Advanced Degrees this week, so I've been revising and revising like crazy.

Now I realize some of you may think that this work for my Th.M. (Master of Theology) Degree may not really be related to my work here in the church, but let me reassure you that there is a huge connection. One of the areas I'm researching for my thesis is the area of leadership and congregational transformation, more specifically examining what is at the heart of helping a congregation to flourish, to grow, to feel like it's a healthy part of Christ's kingdom. I had some of the answers before I started work toward this degree, but the discipline of thinking critically about what's involved has provided me with, I think, greater clarity and understanding, and an ability to express my ideas more coherently. I have also been encouraged that even before I started, I understood the most basic factor for a congregation's health and growth. That foundational factor is right here in this reading from Mark's gospel.

But a note of caution – we can never take a selected piece of text from the bible and treat it as though it stands alone, and this is particularly true of texts from the gospels. For example, today's reading tells us about James and John making an inappropriate request of Jesus – bad enough, but when you see it set in context the extent of their gaff is monumental! You see, Mark locates this little incident right after Jesus has told his disciples for the third time that when he gets to Jerusalem he will be killed. (Matthew, always kinder to the disciples than Mark, has their mother asking the question instead of the boys, but even there Jesus answers the boys, just as he does here. Luke, for whom the apostles are the church's continuity with Jesus, omits the nasty part of the story altogether and relocates the fight that follows to the upper room at the Last Supper!) But back to Mark – the boys, James and John, ask Jesus to grant them the privilege of the seats of honour in the messianic kingdom, right after Jesus has told them he will suffer, and die. Talk about the family getting grabby even before the funeral!

This isn't the first time that the disciples have reacted badly to Jesus' prediction of pain and trouble. Recall that after Jesus first told his disciples about the ugly fate that waited him in Jerusalem, Peter scolded Jesus for talking nonsense and as a result got soundly rebuked – “get behind me, you evil one!” Jesus told him. After the second prediction by Jesus of his passion and suffering, the disciples held a quiet huddle off to the side sorting out who was the most important among them. And now, with the third prediction, the blindness of the disciples is complete. Even the inner circle – Peter, James, and John – don't get it, and so Jesus gives them the last piece of instruction on discipleship and on what the mission of the Messiah, and their mission, is all about.

“But”, Jesus says – and it's a big “but.” A huge “but” even. No, I don't mean the “but” about Jesus not having the authority to grant who sits at his right or left hand. I guess you could get all twisted up and argue with Jesus that according to a fourth-century theologian that he must have had the authority – I prefer to leave that up to Jesus and God to sort out what the authorities were/are.

No, I'm talking about the “but” that changes everything for the disciples, for the church, for you and for me. “But it is not so among you;” With that simple but incredibly powerful statement Jesus reaffirmed to his followers that His way, and their way, and our way, is not the way of the world.

“But it is not so among you.” Ok, if it's not so among us, among whom is it so? Among the Gentiles – in the world of the non-faithful – it is clear that power rules, that those recognized as leaders

have enough authority to act as lords, and if they have enough power they become tyrants. In the everyday world, that question asked by James and John is not usually a problem. Oh, it may be seen by some as grasping, but many in the secular world would comment that it seems reasonable enough for them to sort out the succession, to engage in “forward planning”, to have the authoritative statement from Jesus while he was still in charge. The world, for the most part, operates through power and prestige, through wealth and influence, through scheming and plotting.

Sadly, it is also so among much of the church. Not necessarily the obvious grasping for power by individuals, although there are specific individuals and instances that come readily to mind even within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, however noted we are for doing things “decently and in order.” For example, beyond the usual juggling for the opportunity to become Moderator of one of the church courts there has been an unseemly instance of a newcomer to a Presbytery asking to be put on the Nominating Committee so they could “correct the errors of the Canadian church.” And that’s not an isolated incident, because the same power struggle goes on from congregation to General Assembly, and of course our denomination is not the only branch of the church in which the power struggle takes place.

But there is another more insidious form of power struggle that goes on in the church, and that is the fight to maintain appearances. Somewhere along the way the Presbyterian Church morphed from a feisty, aggressive, caring, evangelizing immigrant church full of hard-working Scots into an ethnic social club for elites or at least self-proclaimed elites. I agree, not all congregations turned into that kind of an exclusive club, but enough did to have a significant impact on the denomination as a whole, and that impact was not a healthy one. According to the Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is the fastest-declining denomination in Canada except for the Ukrainian Orthodox church. I believe a key reason for that decline is the stubborn insistence on a few in each of many congregations to hear this message from Jesus in Mark’s gospel – “but it is not so among you.” Clinging desperately to hang on to a bygone image of somehow being “God’s elite”, struggling to patch up a patina of couth, culture and respectability, worshipping at the shrine of “our spotless old sanctuary” or “our annual tea” or Lord help me that highlight of the liturgical year the “Robbie Burns Supper”, by their very act of focusing upon themselves these people demonstrate with great clarity that they are as blind as the disciples to the mission and calling of Jesus.

“But it is not so among you” Jesus told his disciples, and tells us. We are called to be different from the greedy, grasping, power-driven world. We are called in our following Christ and participating in his mission and ministry to a different way of living our faith. Far from striving to be seen as the elite, the “crème de la crème”, the “in” group, the “first” among Christians, we are called to be servants, slaves even. We are not called by Christ to keep the church hall pristine and preserved for the next tea but to keep it full of everyday people, Christ’s people, eating a hearty breakfast, or meeting to deal with their demons, or celebrating the grace of God in Christ with noise and enthusiasm. We are called by Christ to have his church filled with noisy, boisterous children, not just to keep it dark and quiet and hallowed. Yes, respect is good, and respect for God and his mighty works is very good, but when respect turns our focus to the things of God instead of the call to service from Christ, then we like the disciples become blind to his call.

While there are still many congregations today in which clinging to or striving for status is obvious, it is also clear that in doing so they are headed down the path to oblivion. I suspect most of us can think of at least several congregations that fit that sad description – I know I can. The message for them is also as clear as Jesus’ statement – change, or die. Unless and until they hear the call to turn from an inward, self-absorbed focus to look and see how they can serve the world, they will continue to shrivel, and to disappear – irrelevant to the world and Christ alike.

Not all is doom and gloom, however, because I can also think of many congregations who have heard this instruction from Jesus, who have been reminded that “whoever would be great must be servant of all” and who have put it into practice and are blossoming and growing. And yes, bless you, this is one of those congregations reaching out into the community, into the world, to serve Christ by serving others. In a moment during the week when the chaos seemed even more so than usual, we reminded ourselves in the office that the chaos was part of being an alive and healthy congregation involved in and serving others – hearing the call from Christ to serve, and in doing so finding true joy in serving Christ himself. May we ever continue to be so blessed, continue to hear and respond to Christ’s call to serve!