

### **“Status or Service?” – Mark 10:35-45 – Oct 21/12**

If I seem a little tired this morning it is due mostly to getting home last night from the 121<sup>st</sup> Synod of British Columbia. Gillan and Margaret McNaughtan and I had the pleasure of gathering together with colleagues (both elders and clergy) from the presbyteries in our province to review and consider business of the church that affects all our presbyteries and congregations. It was quite a good meeting, nothing too controversial this year, and our presbytery (Westminster) got a favourable response to a petition we had submitted regarding a minor but significant change to the terms of the Jack Smith Fund. Apart from the business aspect we had an opportunity to chat with our colleagues and the conversation often turned to questions about our rebuilding project and to discussions of church growth in general.

And it seems common that at the heart of everyone's interest is an understanding of what helps a congregation to flourish, to grow, to feel like it's a healthy part of Christ's kingdom. A number of those people, including the guest speaker Rev. Dr. Grace Kim echoed what you've heard me state numerous times as what I believe is the foundational question facing the church – the question of status or service. I believe that that foundational factor is presented right here in today's 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 status and power rule, that those people 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. While we are conditioned to see them as grasping, 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 status and 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, we recently experienced the first (in my experience) instance of someone who had been nominated for the position of Moderator of General Assembly actually campaigning using social media (the internet). Not too long ago there was the 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.” Sadly these are not isolated incidents, because the same power struggle goes on all across our denomination, and within other branches of the Christian church at large.

As bad as that is, there is another perhaps even 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. Certainly not all of our 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 beautiful church” 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. In our calling to be different from the greedy, grasping, power-driven world we are called to a different way of living our faith.. We are called in our following Christ and participating in his mission and ministry to face the foundational question of whether church is about status or service. 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 this weekend I was reminded of many congregations who have heard this instruction from Jesus, who have heard and taken to heart 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, we are reminded by the lingering smell of sausages, pancakes and syrup that Central is among those congregations reaching out into the community, into the world, to serve Christ by serving others. So, let us be affirmed in our faith that we have heard and are responding to the message from Christ to his disciples, and continue to have our focus upon and to find our joy and fulfillment in serving Christ through serving others.