

29th Sunday of the Year

The young couple invited their elderly pastor for Sunday dinner. While they were in the kitchen preparing the meal, the minister asked their son what they were having. "Goat," the little boy replied. "Goat?" replied the startled man of the cloth, "Are you sure about that?" "Yep," said the youngster. "I heard Dad say to Mom, 'Today is just as good as any to have the old goat for dinner.'

Jesus' way of doing things and message is quite easy to understand, but hard to live because it is so opposite of what we naturally do.

Take for instance the story of Jesus' disciples in today's gospel.

James and John were two of Jesus' most favored disciples. Remember how they were along with Peter especially chosen by Christ to witness his Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah were in Jesus' right and left. Now James and John ask if they can be at his right and left when he comes into his power. "Can we sit at your right hand and your left when you come into your kingdom?"

It seems almost embarrassing that Jesus' hand-picked disciples should be grasping for power. In fact, the writer of Matthew's gospel seems so embarrassed that it is not James and John, but their mother who wants to secure their sons' future by asking Jesus to have them to sit at his right and left in the kingdom.

But in Mark's gospel which we hear today, there is no covering up of his disciples warts and cravings: James and John express their desire for power.

Things have not changed much in 2000 years. Even today, for most people, the standard of success in our world, the measure of our greatness is our POWER, power over others. Our power (financial power, military power) to rule over others and to dominate others.

In today's gospel, when the other disciples see James and John make this request for greatness through power. They all join in the debate on who will be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom.

It reminds me of when I was young. We used to play king of the hill. We all battled to be king of the hill. The person at the top of the hill was the chosen one, the one in power. He had power over others because he was top-dog. And if someone is top-dog, the person must continually defend themselves. And others who are not on top are continually battling to get there; and if they succeed and get to the top of the heap, they have to keep battling to stay there.

Jesus knew that a kingdom based on who is the most powerful only leads to violence and exclusion. We see all kinds of examples today.

Here are but a few:

- **Story of the gift of backpacks to Haitian school children and how they used them to show they were superior to their peers who did not receive them.**
- **Story about the failure of Jesuits who educated many of the present day African leaders who are so corrupt to develop men with strong ethical lives.**
- **People who ask me when I will get a “promotion” and get a Good assignment in the suburbs.**
- **My own reluctance to accept opportunities to serve those in need.**

Jesus’ response to this desire of greatness through power is to gather his disciples around him (and his disciples are you and me) and ask them a few simple questions:

“Can you drink of the cup I will drink of?

Can you be baptized with the same baptism I will be baptized?”

Jesus is asking “Can you be immersed in the same waters I will be immersed into?”

Jesus is introducing a new kind of kingdom, a kingdom based not on power but on service, service which leads to building a community of care and joy.

However his kind of kingdom-building calls for dying to our way of kingdom-building and rising to his way.

(PAUSE)

You may have heard on television someone preaching the Gospel of Prosperity. If you follow the Lord, if you do God's will, God will bless you with a new job, a bigger home, a larger bank account. Well, today's gospel contradicts that message. Jesus says that if we want to be great, serve those in need. And when we serve those in need, we will face suffering and death, but we will also find joy and ultimate fullness of life. That is what Jesus said and did. And that is the life he invites us to.

Every once in a while we see someone who gets it. They really grasp the insight of Jesus' message. For instance, a number of years ago, one of the parishes in our neighborhood renamed their community, The Servant church of St. Alexanders. It was as if they heard Jesus' guideline: If you wish to be great you must serve;

Remember in last week's gospel, when the man asked Jesus how he could be great, Jesus instructed him to sell all that he had, give it to the poor and follow him. Today Jesus gives us the same message on how to be great. We need to put aside our desire for power over others and learn how to be servants and servant leaders. There is a lot of pain in making that change of lifestyle, a lot of dying. Serving others seems a contradiction to our desire for greatness. But if we follow Jesus in the pattern of his death to self, he promises us a joy and peace which the world cannot take away.

If you want to become the greatest of all, you must be the servant of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. For the ultimate sign of God's love is to lay down one's life in service to others. May God's kingdom of servant leadership be established in our heart, homes, our country and our world.