

"YOURS, MINE AND OURS"

Mark 10:35-45

October 21, 2018

James and John, Zebedee's sons, came up to him. "Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us."

"What is it? I'll see what I can do."

"Arrange it," they said, "so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory—one of us at your right, the other at your left."

Jesus said, "You have no idea what you're asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I'm about to be plunged into?"

"Sure," they said. "Why not?"

Jesus said, "Come to think of it, you will drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that's not my business. There are other arrangements for that."

When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down. "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage."

Chris and I some years ago had the privilege of visiting a wild elephant sanctuary in Zimbabwe. At this protected compound outside

of Victoria Falls, concerned environmentalists and lovers of all things pachyderm host Jumbo, Jock, Jack, Miz Ellie, and all their other friends, caring for these wonderful creatures from birth to natural death.

In 1992, a Zimbabwean farmer could no longer care for his precious, rescued orphan elephants. The Wild Horizons Elephant Sanctuary was created as a safe haven for these four grown elephants and other distressed baby elephants without parents or families to care for them.

Chris and I were fortunate to visit the sanctuary and have hands-on contact with the elephants living there. It was a moving and at the same time, overwhelming experience to be amongst these graceful, affectionate, and playful giants.

Chris, of course, was beset with photographic opportunities! He had died and gone to camera heaven, taking close up shots of elephant eyelashes and toenails, their skin texture, their tusks and the massive tongues that graced their always open and curious mouths. For me, I could not even speak, so enraptured was I at being so openly and quickly accepted by the giants and their youngsters alike.

Chris wanted to photograph one little guy in particular. Ever the director, for he is very particular and careful to tell stories with his photographs, Chris got the idea to position the baby elephant *just so* as to catch his eyelashes with sunlight playing off of them from behind

the animal. In so doing, he would catch the dancing late afternoon African sunrays and get his perfect shot.

Chris approached the trusting, friendly elephant, put his hand on its head, and attempted to move him where the shot would be best. The elephant was *not* impressed, however, and proceeded to walk straight toward Chris, swinging his trunk into the camera and knocking him clean off his feet and onto the ground a few feet away.

The moral of this story? Never try to position a baby elephant weighing several times that of your own body unless you are prepared to be the butt of his mud bath joke.

In 1968, a film was released to the public about an American true story. In 1961 widow Helen North and widower Frank Beardsley of Carmel, California married. Between them they brought into the union 18 children. They added two more during their marriage for a total of 20. Lucille Ball starred and produced the film about this family, her counterpart being played by the incomparable Henry Fonda.

Yours, Mine, and Ours explored what happens when many, many people are brought together under one roof with common purpose but individual wants, needs, and stories. Many of you no doubt saw and delighted in this film.

Just a year later, television took this theme, albeit on a smaller scale, and made a sitcom about a smaller blended family and their

whacky maid, Alice. The Brady Bunch took the country by storm and enjoyed a successful run on Friday nights for 5 years. In syndication from September 1975 to the present over 40 years later, according to its creator, Sherwin Schwartz, an episode of the show has been broadcast somewhere in the United States or abroad every day of the year!

The disciples in our Gospel story today are eager to cut in the Jesus line, to be at the front of the show, to be recognized by the Master as the greatest and best-loved of the disciples. Since the very first days of the Jesus movement, the faithful have been jockeying for position so as to receive the holy blessing and so as to garner both favor and power in their church communities.

Greg and Marsha Brady, teenagers representing each of the two bloodlines in the blended family unit, duke it out in the newly combined household for status and privilege, each claiming they should be first in line and granted deference by all the other children. James and John, sons of Zebedee, elbow their way next to Jesus and demand to be placed at his left and at his right in the place of honor so that the pecking order be clearly established in the ranks of discipleship.

Jesus admonishes the foolish brothers, cryptically warning them that they don't even know what they are asking of him, assuring them that their time will come soon enough that they, too, will be "drinking

the cup" that he will drink, that they will be baptized into the baptism into which Jesus will be plunged. Since we know how the Jesus story turns out, we want to call out to James and John, "be careful what you wish for!"

In this text, the cup and the baptism are symbols Jesus uses for his coming days of arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion. That James and John position themselves on his right and on his left reminds us of another gospel writer's depiction of the Crucifixion. Luke's narrative places two thieves with Jesus on Golgotha, one on his right and one on his left. Are these places of honor or ones in which no one in their right mind would wish to be found?

Today is Laity Sunday and this text holds us in an interesting tension in that regard. This scripture passage is really about who shall hold the power and the honor in the church of Jesus. It is about the jockeying for position that humans seem to need and want when in social groupings.

Not content to just be one of the pack, leaders always emerge, shoulders get bumped, relationships get strained, and someone's feelings inevitably gets hurt. That basic storyline made the Brady Bunch America's most watched family show of the early 70s; it is a central theme as well of the earlier film, *Yours, Mine, and Ours*.

It's just natural, isn't it? Chris and I always laugh at our dogs, our Boyz; one can't be petted without the other one nosing in. When we go

to visit our five little grandchildren and they are all in one place—3 5-year-olds, a 3-year-old, and a 2-year-old, they are always trying to one-up each other for our attention, trying to sit closest to us, or grabbing our hand on a walk. It's just human nature to want to be next to the perceived seat of power, to be special, to be number 1. The disciples of Jesus were no different than the disciples of today.

In so many churches, the clergy and the lay people of the church fight for position. They fight over control of the budget, for control over worship—especially worship music. They fight over programming and they fight over the children's school. The push-pull is unhealthy, and it is horrible modeling for the youngsters. This type of power struggle, to see who is the greatest, who should sit in the glory seat, tears some churches apart.

Here at UCC Parker Hilltop, we have been intentional in designing a church leadership model that shares power. We call it a collaborative approach, where I your pastor work cooperatively with church laypersons in various ministries to together move the best interests of the church family forward, to make all voices heard, and to share the joys and the concerns of the organization.

Believe me that I tell you that throughout our Rocky Mountain Conference, we have one of the healthiest systems around. Angie and I both serve on Conference committees where we see the best of the best and the worst of the worst. Often on our way back to our church

from our meetings, we remark about how stable our church is and how grateful we are for that. There's no one here trying to bully the elephant.

In *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, theologian Diana Butler Bass identifies three characteristics that thriving churches have in common:

1. They embrace tradition, but not traditionalism;
2. They emphasize practice, not purity; and
3. The objective of their spiritual life is wisdom, not certainty, the questions being more important than the answers.

In other words, the pecking order in a church community is not nearly as important as the ability of the church body to honestly read itself and to then respond to the call of the *Gospel* with sacred innovation, to respond to the Spirit's urgent call to be in the world and not merely be an observer or critic of it, and to always seek the next question, rather than the easy dogmatic pronouncement.

When viewed in this way, James and John's need to be at the head chair at the head table is pure folly; it is not the way of Christ at all! Their need for certainty is bemusing to Jesus who teaches with parables stories, not rules. Their want to be told how good and holy they are misses the point of the teachings of their leader that such social and political constructions are meaningless; what matters is what

you do for others in need, for others in pain, and for others who need love, not who you know or how holy you are. The brothers crave recognition in the traditional sense of having the power seats at the table, but in Jesus' theology, those at the far end of the table, nay, those out in the street and not even in the dining hall, are sitting at the place of honor even as they sit in the filthy sewer eating scrap-ends even the dogs reject.

Today in our church we celebrate the laypeople here—I celebrate the laypeople here, you, my sisters and my brothers in faith. As your pastor I pledge to lead *alongside* you, walking hand in hand through these perplexing and anxious times, asking more questions together than requiring answers. I commit to be willing to try out new models for collaborative ministry rather than insisting on my own way or succumbing to a bully's edict. I wish to be your pastor on whom you can rely to be truthful yet vulnerable, responsible yet malleable, and open to your innovations yet listening for the Spirit nudges that grace my own ears.

Jesus asks nothing less than that we walk the road together, listening, praying, and serving the Word as one church. I am hopeful that we can give ourselves permission to dream yet a new Gospel message for our seniors, for our children, for our visitors, for those oppressed in our society, for those who feel unloved and unheard, and yes, even for those who are proclaiming their righteousness so loudly

that they cannot stop to listen for even a moment to their folly. For all these may we dream a new *Gospel* message that will inspire us, embolden us, and connect us even more profoundly.

It was so funny to see our little elephant whack Chris that day in Zimbabwe. With just a playful flick of his trunk, he sent my Beloved sprawling on the dirt. So I think it is with *God*, with *God's Holy Spirit*. Manipulate and manhandle though we wish to, Spirit always has the last Word, the last chuckle. The love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit working within us is yours, mine, and ours to nurture. Let us treat these precious gifts as though the whole world depended on it, for it most certainly does.

May It Be So.