

Lectionary 29 (B)
October 21, 2018
Text: Mark 10:35-45

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At the heart of things, what Jesus is all about is healing— in each of our lives individually, and for all of us together—the whole human family. It seems pretty obvious to me that there's something seriously out of whack with the human family—there's war and violence, there's hunger and poverty. The body of humanity is in tremendous pain. But how to treat that pain? What sort of healing power could bring wholeness and blessing to such profound dysfunction and disease?

In our gospel story for today, Jesus addresses one of the roots of our misery, one of the underlying causes that has the human family so badly twisted out of shape. All of human history looks like a struggle for domination, to be a big deal at the expense of others. The motto of the human family could easily be “me-first”— just like James and John, with their request to Jesus for positions of special privilege when he comes into his glory.

It's really a rather embarrassing story about two of the pillars of the early church. In the verses right before our reading for today, Jesus, for the third time, warned his disciples about what would happen when he got to Jerusalem—he would be betrayed and arrested, beaten and condemned and put to death. But Jesus trusted that God would vindicate him. Against this background, the request from James and John for positions of special privilege at Jesus' right and left hand—it makes them seem absolutely clueless. I mean, what kind of glory did they think Jesus would have to share with them as he suffered and died? But worse than that, it shines a genuinely unflattering light on the two brothers. They are just selfish and pushy. They are all about “me-first.” It's not only that they seem to have not heard a word Jesus has said, but they're part of the “me-first” problem.

Whether it grows out of fear that there might not be enough, or out of a sense of entitlement, “me-first” damages and destroys relationships. It unravels human community. When “me-first” colors our outlook on the world, other people become rivals and threats rather than neighbors. “Me-first” fools us into thinking that life is some sort of competition, and the only way to be happy is to out-compete everyone else. “Me-first” is the tragic trap that the human family has

fallen into. But there is a way out. There is another way to live. It's the way of healing that Jesus reveals.

So for James and John, Jesus patiently, gently, lays it out. And through the words of scripture, he's also speaking to us—because we need that healing now as much as they did then. Jesus says, "You know how the world is." Among the Gentiles, the ones they recognize as rulers make big displays of lording their power and status over everyone else. The ones they think of as "great" are the ones who use power ruthlessly to serve themselves, and to squash anyone who gets in their way. But it is not so among you! Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. And Jesus isn't offering an alternative method of competition—who can be the most humble. Instead, he's offering an alternative way of seeing the world and living in it. He's offering a way of healing.

Jesus says: When you think about being great, I want you to think about the one who is dedicated to making other peoples' lives better, who spends their time and energy in ways that are compassionate and generous and caring. If you were to have a "competition" to identify who's Number One, it would be the one who is most dedicated to giving of themselves for others—and not just so they can be "Number One," but truly for others. The healing Jesus offers is in the way of life he describes—it is all about escaping the "me-first" trap by serving our neighbors, living with compassion, giving of ourselves.

And Jesus does so much more than just talk about it. Jesus lives this way of healing—for us—so that we can receive it and experience it and become part of it. Jesus isn't just a teacher who is telling us what to do. He is the embodiment of God's love, so that we can know ourselves to be beloved children of God, and have our lives changed by the power of that love. Jesus reaches out to us with the forgiveness of God, so that we can know we are forgiven, for everything we've ever done, so we can know ourselves to be set free from judgment and condemnation, and free to forgive those who hurt us, free to be part of the change God is working in the world. Jesus sees us with the compassion of God, and welcomes us into God's embrace, so that we can see others with compassion—really and truly see them as children of God—and extend welcome to them as well. Jesus pours out for us the generosity of God, so that we can know ourselves to be so richly blessed with life and love and gifts from God, that we want to generously share this great blessing with others.

Children of God, you know how the world is—everyone scratching and clawing to make themselves first. And people look up to those who advertise their callousness and cruelty. But it is not so among you. You have seen through the lie that frantically chasing your desires will make you happy. You have not been fooled by our culture’s propaganda, that you need more-more-more, and then you’ll be happy. You have recognized that “me-first” is an emperor with no clothes! For you, Jesus has turned “me-first” on its head. Jesus has shown you what a genuinely human life looks like—it’s compassion, and forgiveness, and care for neighbors in need. It’s generosity, and humility, and welcoming community. It looks like Jesus, who, by turning the world that we know upside down, turns everything right. Thanks be to God. Amen