

Proper 24 - Year B  
St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
Greenville, South Carolina  
21 October 2018

*Mark 10:35-45*

*(Mark 10:35-45)* James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Among the most enduring recent authors of devotional writings is the late Henri J.M. Nouwen. Though he has been gone for more than twenty years, his books and reflections remain widely available and read in multiple editions. Even today, one of our 30-something sons uses Nouwen's long-ago-published book of daily meditations, *Bread for the World*, as part of his prayer discipline.

Nouwen began publishing early in his career and quickly built up a reputation as a deeply spiritual and centered priest. His ability to connect mystical and theological subjects to the common things of life was uncanny and broadly appealing. Though he was a Roman Catholic priest, his writings are treasured by Christians of all persuasions and traditions. A consequence of his publishing literally dozens of books was that he

became something of a star in the religious world and could have made millions just on the talk circuit.

Instead, he chose to give away his book and lecture earnings and to move into one of an international network of communities for adults with major, even profound disabilities, called *L'Arche* in French, or "The Ark" in English. Those who assist in these communities are not all paid helpers. Some choose to live full-time in the community as residents, as Henri Nouwen did, which included dressing and bathing residents and being a partner in their daily lives. His stories of how the residents changed *his* life are life-changing for those who read about them.

Some 25 years ago, two parishioners in my former parish in Georgia had the opportunity to attend a retreat led by Nouwen at Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina. During that retreat, one of the developmentally disabled residents talked about his experience at *L'Arche*, mutually leading the retreat. In the course of the retreat, Nouwen jokingly reported that since joining the family at *L'Arche*, he no longer answered questions about what his two middle initials, "J.M." stood for by answering with the names his parents had attached to them. Now when people ask me, he said, "I tell them that they stand for Henri 'Just Me' Nouwen." All the various letters *after* his name that indicated his many degrees and accomplishments had come to mean nothing to him.

—Henri Nouwen was a servant in the deepest sense of the word. He lived in a community filled with challenges, a community that led him to recognize and *live* the sacraments and life of the Church as a call to deep and inner service toward one another, whoever we are and whatever our

life circumstance. He believed with his whole being and lived his life seeking Christ in others and expecting to find Christ there.

By comparison, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, don't come off looking too well in today's gospel. They seem both sycophantic and power-hungry. "We'll do anything you ask us to do. Just let us sit next to you, next to your glory and power and, really, we'll do anything."

Jesus gives them a hearing, even testing their resolve to see just how far they're willing to go to sit at the head table. —And he rebukes them for their presumption. The other apostles may not fare much better than James and John. It's hard to tell, but you get the impression they're angry because they didn't think of it first. That may be unfair toward the other ten, but Jesus nonetheless turns the moment into an opportunity to teach *all of them: we don't lord power over others*. You are called to be servants, not power brokers. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Furthermore, *all* who follow me are called to servanthood, even slavery, Jesus says.

Quibbles in the church are clearly not new—quibbles over power, authority, and understanding what it means to be a *faithful* follower of Jesus. These days, our biggest quibbles, even between baptized brothers and sisters in Christ, are painfully visible on the much larger political and social stages in our lives. People across the political spectrum both experience and participate in alienation and reactivity on countless issues, both large and small—reactivity that extends into families and faith communities.

Henri Nouwen's witness gives us some guidance in our own struggles to find a way to navigate conflicted times. Jesus called his disciples to suffer

*on behalf of each other* as their witness to the love of God—to release their grasp on being right—on “winning”—*for the sake of our relationships with each other in Christ*. In politics as in Church, we complain about the mote in others’ eyes, represented by issues on which we disagree, and fail to see the log in our own eyes. *We fail to see our deficit of love for one another*. Of this, Paul tells us “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Among the things I celebrate about *this* parish community of St. Peter’s is that your love for one another *is* present. It doesn’t mean there is no disagreement among you; it means that love and respect transcend mere winning.

Many souls in the world around us yearn for communities in which love and respect are practiced, where people aren’t jockeying for seats higher up at the table, and where mutual trust is palpable. In this time of deep societal anger and alienation, it is our particular call and moment of opportunity as disciples of Jesus to embrace and practice servant disciplines even more fully as witnesses to the love of God in our lives. As servants, it is a time to love, to give, to seek, and to pray. Such marks of a disciple community all point to an inner servanthood: for we love because God loves us. We give because life is abundant. We seek because we see dimly. And we pray because God is.

Jesus said to James and John, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Yes, there *is* a cup to drink—a cup that can at times be bitter and hard to swallow. There *is* a baptism that calls us to die to our old selves—our ideological, opinionated, conflicted and competitive selves; and to rejoice in our new life as servants of the living God. That service *is* perfect freedom. —You and I are called to be witnesses of these things.