

HOW CAN I HELP?

Pentecost 22-B

October 21, 2018

Mark 10:35-45

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

That last verse of this morning’s gospel reading reminds us that the teachings of the One we follow and the faith to which we subscribe sometimes go against our (sinful) human nature. In “The Cost of Servanthood,” an article in *Synthesis* (a monthly preaching publication), the writer tells us: “The heart of discipleship is service and not privilege. And those who perform such service do it with no thought for recognition.” [*Synthesis*, October 2018, p. 9]

We have no argument with that. I frequently talk about our role as Emmanuel Church in this community, and it always centers on how we make the gospel real for others.

A medical drama, “New Amsterdam,” premiered this season, and it features Dr. Max Goodwin, a new medical director at an old hospital who regularly quizzes his staff by asking, “How can I help?” I think that should be our mission as the church—to constantly look around us and ask (even if only to ourselves), “How can I help?”—because that is how the Word is made flesh, how Jesus becomes one with us.

As the doctor in the drama learns, when we begin to address what people *really* need, it often means going against the status-quo, and that puts us likely heroes in dangerous territory. Jesus understood this and even warned his disciples repeatedly about the cost of living our lives faithfully, in line with God’s design for God’s people.

As we see yet again in today’s reading, the disciples aren’t hearing any of it. We could say that they are being arrogant and even shameless as they fought over *who among them was the greatest* (as we heard a few weeks ago) or about sitting alongside Jesus in a place of honor. Part of it is denial. Part of it is that they are applying their standards to Jesus. *Why is he being so negative? After all, if he is God’s chosen, isn’t he more powerful than the religious and political leaders? Can’t he simply overthrow the powers-that-be in order to usher in this kingdom of God of which he speaks?*

But Jesus has to keep reminding them that God’s way isn’t about power over others, but rather the freedom to let go of all pretension and the willingness to serve rather than to be served.

In the commentary I cited earlier, the writer warns: “Those who merely reflect the values of this world ultimately can do nothing to transform it.” [*Synthesis*, October 2018, p. 9]

Jesus, who is journeying toward Jerusalem—where he knows the outcome will come in the shape of a cross—knows that the cost of being faithful means giving himself up fully, in order that the completeness of God’s love will be made known. He speaks of becoming a ransom for many, something that suggests sacrifice or atonement; but this isn’t about God getting his “pound of flesh” for humanity’s transgressions. It is about God-in-Jesus loving his creation 100%, and emptying himself in that love so that the world might gain a fuller glimpse of its potential and promise.

It sounds like a beautiful vision, and we put that vision to poetry and music in our worship as we plant the seeds of a kingdom vision. We can leave this place on Sunday pumped up by the vision of a better world that God promises to partner with us in making.

Yet the vision gets clouded, darkened, and a lot less visible when we are confronted face-to-face with the worst of what this world can be. Journalists are not only verbally attacked; but as we've learned this week, they can lose their lives in a gruesome death (as happened in the murder at Saudi Embassy in Turkey).

Regularly, people looking for acceptance, trust, and assistance are dismissed as not worthy or not credible. Sometimes it just feels as though the forces of evil are winning. Life isn't fair! It certainly didn't seem fair for Jesus or for his disciples (none of the twelve died of natural causes). And throughout history we've seen plenty of examples of evil heaped on good people.

While there is a promise of something better *in the life to come*, Jesus' message still reminds us that we can't turn a blind eye to what is happening in the here and now. We have been called together, baptized, fed at the table, and sent forth to make God's goodness known *now!*

Petty arguments about position and power are shallow and meaningless. And they are artificial, temporary props at best. Rather than waste our time on them, Jesus shows by example, pointing out the important work we have, being signs of God's presence *in real time* so that all may know God's love. We go in peace and serve the Lord by serving those whom God has placed in our midst.

“Hi! I'm a child of God, a follower of Jesus, and a member of the faith community known as Emmanuel Lutheran Church. How can I help?”

Amen.