

Fortunately, as we've noted earlier in this Gospel, Jesus is a teacher (Rabbi). He patiently, repeatedly takes time to teach us that his way often leads in a different direction than the way we think we want to walk.

He keeps teaching his disciples, keeps pointing them toward the cross, the way that God gets what God wants, a world, brought back to God, not by power, coercion, violence, and glory – the way the world gets what it wants – but through suffering, serving love. Though James and John, the sons of Zebedee, misunderstand Jesus, and so do we, the good news in this Sunday's gospel is that Jesus continues to teach them and they continue to follow.

When Jesus tells them, once again, that he has a difficult “cup” to drink, a tough “baptism” ahead, they continue to walk with him. Even though he speaks to them in words that are tough and even offensive (“*whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all*”) they don't turn away. They continue to walk with him toward that way that leads to Calvary.

And so do you. The gospel is not the solution to all of our problems, the cure to all our aches and pains or another technique for getting what we want. The gospel is sometimes the beginning of problems, the initiation of new aches and pains and concerns that we would not have had if we'd not been attempting to follow Jesus. The gospel, this church, your discipleship, is the means that God uses to get what God wants.

So, let's follow, even if the pathway leads to a place we did not at first want to go.

To the praise of the Name that is timeless and the Love that is boundless.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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A Message from Mark!

Elbowing Our Way to the Top

18th October 2009 - Pentecost 20

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45

Theme We live in a culture that teaches us to look out for number one. In a competitive, achievement-oriented society, the honours go to the person who succeeds in elbowing their way to the top. Jesus calls us to live differently. He beckons us to walk the way of the cross.

Prayer *Jesus, you modeled leadership with a basin and towel. You demonstrated love through suffering service. You gave the ultimate gift in your sacrifice upon the cross. Help us to give up our desire for power and prestige. Enable us to stoop, to bend down, to come close to you. Amen.*

When he was 11 or 12, their son had some strife in school. They took him to a psychologist who put him through a battery of tests to find out why he was having such a tough time. Then they were called in to hear the results. “*Your son is a wonderful kid,*” the Doc said. “*Unfortunately, he has an exaggerated sense of empathy for others. He gets distracted from his school work by anyone else who is having difficulty. He's kind, sympathetic, and really concerned about others.*”

“*Well, what's wrong with that?*” they asked. “*All of those are esteemed Christian virtues.*” “*Congratulations. You've done a beaut job of raising a fine young Christian lad. Unfortunately, none of those traits will lead to a great VCE ENTER score.*”

We keep having to learn and relearn how odd the Christian way is when compared with the ways of the world. The world values competition, assertiveness, power and prestige. Jesus calls us to walk the way of humble service.

The message of servant leadership is one that most Christians today have failed to hear. We're more like James and John than we are like Jesus. And our lack of understanding of servant leadership impacts our church. Most of you will know that we try to recruit some new Elders each year. These positions are very difficult to fill. We've had no shortage of people to ask, but most kindly refuse saying something like, "*I'm not good enough*"; "*I'm not ready.*"

I believe our problem comes directly from a misunderstanding of the nature of leadership in our church. When someone asks you to consider being an Elder or Church Councillor, they're not asking you to take a position of prestige and honour. We don't have any positions like that in the church. Neither are they suggesting that you have to be so good that you're worthy of sitting at the right hand of Jesus in the Kingdom of God. Our UCA understanding of church is not a hierarchical organisation where the leaders assume the top positions of authority by virtue of their pristine character.

In the church, leaders are servants, willing servants. When someone asks you to do something, I hope you can hear them saying with Jesus, "*We're looking for someone who is willing to serve.*" We need someone willing to kneel beside a faithful older member and offer him communion.

We don't need people who will put on airs of prestige and power, pretending to be better than they are. This is a hospital for sinners. All of us have made our mistakes and have our weaknesses. The church needs some of the sinners willing to serve in the name of Christ.

Henri Nouwen has a wonderful image in his book *'The Wounded Healer'*. The healer in his story was not a person in perfect health, but a sick person. The difference was that the healer would bind up his own wounds long enough to minister to others. That's all any of us can do in the church because we are all wounded healers.

We need to learn and relearn this truth, much like Jesus' disciples. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus has been teaching them that his way is counter to the world's way. He's journeying, not toward fame and fortune, but toward the cross. And even then, two of Jesus' disciples ask to be near him when he finally takes his place "*in glory.*"

"When you're finally elected Messiah, who will get to sit on your cabinet?" they ask. *"Jesus, how can you enable us to get what we want rather than be troubled by what you want?"*

Now we'd like to think that we're a little smarter than Jesus' first disciples. We know that Jesus is not the path to glory. Back in the 1920s, there was a flamboyant American evangelist, "*Daddy Grace,*" who used to preach that, by following his technique, you could guarantee yourself bundles of money, sent straight from heaven.

You might think *'It could only happen in America'* – and none of us would be so crude as to believe such promises, yet that sort of *'prosperity theology'* gets thousands in every week at the popular Hillsong Church in Sydney. You see, even today we bring our expectations to Jesus, expectations that sometimes clash with his way.

In my first church, (Mt Clear, in Ballarat) we initiated a program of evangelism, reaching out to the young and growing community to share the love of Jesus and grow our church. We were quite successful. In three years it doubled in attendance and outgrew its buildings! New members were welcomed and the place was bursting at the seams. But about a year later we became concerned. Some of the new members expressed some disappointment with the church they'd joined. They said that we'd failed to live up to our promises.

Then we realised how our evangelistic efforts had backfired on us. We'd presented the church and discipleship in that congregation as the answer to all of life's problems.

'Having trouble with your teenagers? Then come along to our church. We have a great youth program.' *'Difficulties in your marriage? OK! We have some seminars and home groups that will strengthen your marriage relationship.'* In other words, *'Where is your life in a mess? Come to church and we'll fix it.'*

No, we didn't promise them glory or wealth, but we did promise them something close to glory. Come to our church, follow Jesus, and we'll fix everything that ails you. Jesus is the means to get what you want.