Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

October 21, 2018

Neal MacPherson

PEOPLE OF THE WAY Mark 10:32–45

Let us do our best to shed light on this morning’s reading from Mark’s Gospel. The disciples never seem to be able to grasp the true nature of Jesus’s ministry. Here we have the request of James and John to sit, one at the right hand of Jesus and one at the left when Jesus comes into his glory. This is nothing more than a bold-faced request for power in the kingdom to come. Jesus replies that such a request is not his to grant, and besides, they do not know what they are asking. Are they able to undergo the baptism of fire that Jesus is being baptized with, or drink the cup of suffering that Jesus drinks? They reply, “Sure, we are able!” They don’t know what they are saying. Jesus warns them, the baptism that he undergoes they will undergo, and the cup that he drinks they will indeed drink, that’s for certain. They are going to share their leader’s fate. As for their request to sit by his side in glory, it’s not his to grant. More so, they best not even think about it. They need to focus on their discipleship in this world.

After his words to James and John, Jesus offers all of the disciples a model for their own leadership. They are not to be leaders who lord it over others. They are not to be leaders who exercise power over others. No, they are to be leaders who serve. “Whoever wishes to be 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 as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:44–45)

And so we have it. They way of faithful discipleship and leadership is costly servanthood. This is to be the way of those who would be counted among the faithful followers of Jesus.

It is important to note that this conversation Jesus had with James and John and then with all the disciples took place “on the road, going up to Jerusalem.” Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. For the Gospel writer Mark, to say that they were on the road to Jerusalem meant that they were on their way to the cross. You may know that the early Christians were called the “People of the Way.” The “Way” in this phrase refers to the “Way” of Jesus, or, in the context of the Gospel of Mark as a whole, the “Way” of the cross.

We are People of the Way, a servant people, a people living in the shadow of the Cross. Whenever we worship in this place, we are reminded that we are a community overshadowed by a Cross. But what does this mean in the context of our world? In response to that question, we might say: “not very much.” The cross is not a valued symbol in our world, except in jewelry stores. The cross, after all, represents failure and defeat and suffering. These are not honored in our world. Our world instead honors power and success. This was true for the political elite in the Roman Empire, beginning with the Emperor himself. As Jesus says, “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.” We need only witness the posture of our own President Trump to know that the way of power is still alive and well. He wants to be a “winner” in all things, and, as a leader will not admit of any defeat or failure. A good portion of our society wants their leaders to be just like that.

We should not be surprised that in line with this way of thinking, a goodly portion of American Christianity puts its faith in an all-powerful God. This is the God who is seated in the heavens. who looks down upon the earth, and who determines the fate of each and every human being and even the fate of the earth itself. God determines whether we will get well if we are sick, or whether we will die, whether we are in for good fortune or whether we are destined for misfortune, whether we will be saved or whether we will be lost. Such a God is all-powerful, all knowing, timeless, unchanging, unmoved. When we pray to such a God, we ask God to intervene on our behalf, and then it is up to God. If we contract an incurable illness, it is therefore God’s will. If we get well, it is also God’s will. God is not unlike a cosmic Santa Claus who gives us what we deserve, depending upon whether we have been naughty or we have been nice.

This notion of God seems extreme, and yet it is this idea of God that lies at the heart of conventional Christianity. Our language betrays us. We say: “my child died because God willed it – there must be a reason why it happened, or maybe it was something that I did to cause the death of my child – maybe I am not good enough.” It is God who holds all the power.

There is something in me that resists this idea of God. I just cannot bring myself to believe in a God who brings suffering either as a punishment for sin or a test for the righteous. To me, such a God is capricious and aloof.

When I was younger, the all-powerful God was more acceptable to me, but the older I have gotten, the more questioning I have become. In my questioning, I have been helped by reading a number of theologians who also question this traditional, classical conception of God, among them Douglas John Hall, my dear friend with whom I spent four days when I was on vacation just last month

There is another conception of God, which is in keeping with our Gospel story today. In this other conception, God is not the all-powerful God who sits unmoved in the heavens. Rather, God is the compassionate, loving God who is with us and for us, who is deeply involved in creation, and who chooses to be in solidarity with us. This God is compassionate and all loving. This God does not sit in the heavens controlling the earth and its people. This God rolls up his, her sleeves and comes down to earth in order to be present with us in both our joy and our sorrow. This God comes to love us, not to control us. This God is willing to subject himself/herself to defeat and failure and suffering, and is therefore a God who is in solidarity with us in each and every circumstance of our lives, both in the good times and also in our times of trial.

What evidence do we have that this indeed is what God is like? Well, I believe that we need only look to Jesus. In the Gospel accounts we find a Jesus who speaks and lives and practices love, not power. Indeed, right at the beginning of his ministry, he rejects the way of power. When tempted to abandon his worship of God in order to hold power over all the nations of the earth, Jesus refuses. His ministry will not be a ministry of power but a ministry of love and compassion “Compassion” literally means “suffering with.” He will welcome all within the circle of his love. His life will end on a cross, a symbol not of power but of powerlessness. His way will be the way of service.

That is to be our way, as well. After his words to James and John, Jesus offers all of the disciples a model for their own leadership. They are not to be leaders who lord it over others. They are not to be leaders who exercise power over others. No, they are to be leaders who serve. “Whoever wishes to be 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 as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:44–45)

In Jesus, we see God. In him, we come to know that God is a God of service and love and solidarity. In truth, when you think about it, love is the very opposite of power. If I have power and control over another, I cannot truly love. It is only as I relinquish power in order to be fully present with another that I can love. Of course, there is a power in love, but it is not the kind of power that controls.

It’s about love, not power. God is a God of love, not power. The only power God exercises is the power of love, which is not a power that controls. This is what we see in the life and ministry of Jesus, the Christ. And we are to follow in his footsteps. We seek to serve, not to be served. What a profound truth there is in all of this! Our call to be servants in the service of others mirrors the life and ministry of Jesus, which in turn mirrors the nature of God. It therefore matters how we conceive of God. It matters how we see Jesus. It matters how we are to be with each other. It is about love, not power.

To this way of love and service we are called. We are in truth “People of the Way.” For me, it is all summed up in a favorite quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. These words are contained in a sermon he preached called “The Drum Major Instinct.” Preached Dr. King:

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to

be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—

wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize

that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That’s

your new definition of greatness. And this morning, the thing that I like about it. . . by giving that definition of greatness, it

means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can

serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You

don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.

You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You

don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You

don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in

physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul

generated by love. And you can be that servant.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Martin Luther King, *The Drum Major Instinct,”* The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Harper Collins, 1986) 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)