

If you have a feeling of déjà vu after hearing that gospel reading then I have one thing to say to you. Congratulations! You have been paying attention.

Three times Jesus has told his disciples that he's about to be killed. Three times they have not understood what he's saying and three times he has given them a different model of authority and leadership. The kind of authority which Jesus has is given to him by God the Creator, and is not to be used by taking up arms against the Romans or anyone else. The first time Jesus explained, "whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it" and "whoever loses his life . . . shall save it" (8:35); the second time he said "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all" (9:35); and now he continues, "whoever wishes to become great . . . shall be your servant" and "whoever wishes to be first . . . shall be slave of all".

Why does he repeat himself three times? Because this is important and it's as hard for us to hear today as it was for the disciples. This is the central plank of Jesus' teaching as we see it in how he acted as well as what he said.

When I was about 5 or 6, my mother took me to the zoo with Eric, the boy who lived next door. In the café I asked for a bottle of Coke. My mother was dubious because we never drank soda at home, and said that a whole bottle would be too much so Eric and I should share one. I strongly disagreed with her and probably because she didn't want a scene in public, I got a whole bottle, all to myself. Unfortunately, about half way through I began to feel as though I was totally filled up with bubbles and sticky sweetness. To my chagrin I realized that Mother was right. I couldn't manage a whole bottle.

James and John were ambitious men. They wanted to be powerful, they wanted to make a difference. So they asked to be seated next to Jesus in his glory. But just as I couldn't imagine that a bottle of Coke would have so many, many bubbles in it, they couldn't imagine what they were really asking. They couldn't imagine that Jesus' glory might look like an ignominious death.

And the moral of the story might be, be careful what you ask for, you just might get it!

But we can't allow ourselves to stop there and treat this so lightly. This discipleship teaching of Jesus is so important that it's come up for the third time. As his contemporary disciples we too need to treat it very seriously. Today I want to think about it from three different perspectives: the first is ambition and desire, the second is non-violence and the third is service.

Ambition is often what keeps us motivated and moving forward. Ambition is what we want, it is the desire of our hearts. Often we have ambitions which are not in keeping with our abilities or with the realities of our lives. It's not actually true that anyone can do anything. Watching Billy Jean King win at Wimbledon made me want to follow in her footsteps. I wanted to be a tennis champion. But actually I'm built more for comfort than for speed and my hand eye coordination is disappointingly poor. I am not made to be a tennis champion and no amount of longing, no amount of tennis lessons and practice would have made me one.

James and John thought they knew what they wanted. They wanted to be seated with Jesus on the thrones of heaven. But they didn't understand that that would mean suffering and pain. Yes, yes they said, we can drink the cup that you drink – we often drink out of the same cup – and yes, yes we can be baptized with the same baptism. But they couldn't know what God had in mind. They couldn't imagine

that Jesus' time of glory would paradoxically be his crucifixion and that those on his right and his left would be bandits.

Ambition and desire are gifts of God. They move us forward, helping us to see what can be done and how to do it. But they can also be very destructive. They are destructive when our desire for something or to be something leads us into wrong relationship with our self, our neighbor, God or the environment. They are destructive when we allow them to be so important that we abandon the values of the gospel, the values of God's reign. This is a huge challenge for many of us. We live in a competitive world. It's hard to get ahead without pushing other people aside. That's even true in the market – I connect with my competitive me-first attitude every Monday at Farmers' Market as I try to get the best lettuce, the organic strawberries, the biodynamic kale. There's a limited supply and I want to elbow other people out of the way so that I can get it.

Being humble and non-violent is not in our nature because human nature has been marred by sin; it is not as God originally intended. But we are the baptized – we are those who have been brought from the old reign into the new. Our old nature with its me-first ambition and desire has been overcome; we now get to live that out. In the new reign, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all" and "whoever wishes to be first . . . shall be slave of all".

This doesn't mean, I think that if we want to be first – if our ambition pushes us to be first - that we should choose to be last because that will somehow make us first which is what we wanted in the first place. I think it means that me-first isn't part of the reign of God. Because me-first puts us in wrong relationship with our neighbors, the environment and God. As disciples of Christ we may have career ambitions or a desire to excel in an art or a sport; these can be wonderful things so long as we keep them in balance with our desire to serve God and our neighbor. Our desire to be pre-eminent in the reign of God means that we must be willing to serve, and willing to be last – to be overlooked.

This may be one meaning of that rather puzzling part of the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The prodigal has returned home, the party is in full swing and his older brother returns from working in the fields and he is resentful and furious. And we sympathize. But that isn't the way of the kingdom. In the reign of God we are able to have the qualities of Christ who although he was God, humbled himself and became man. And the quality of Christ is to dance with those who dance and cry with those who cry (Rom. 12:15). If the elder brother had been able to summon up the qualities of Christ he would have been thrilled to see his brother and able to enjoy the party.

But no, he was caught in resentment because the brother had squandered his share of the inheritance, leaving his brother to look after his parents and the ranch, and now he dared to show his face again. It's very human but it is not the humble, joyful attitude of the one who is last.

I'm sure you've seen the coffee mug, "Do what you love, or love what you do." Some of us are fortunate enough to have achieved our major ambitions. Others not so much. We may love the way our lives have turned out, or we may be in the situation of older brother. The challenge of living in the reign of God is to let go of the resentment and the anger and be fully present in the place that we are. To love what we do and where we are, even if it's not at all what we had in mind.

Praying for "The serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference" is at the base of this way of living. When we are living with

serenity, humbly and soberly; when we are living the way of gentle simplicity then we do not need to engage in violence. We are living a path of nonviolence, the path that Jesus showed us in his refusal to play the game with the religious and secular authorities of his time. It looked like defeat, but it was victory.

James and John were probably imagining a violent future when they asked to be with Jesus in glory, but not one in which the victory came with Jesus allowing himself to be killed. If they understood the non-violence of the reign of God, they probably imagined that God the Creator would intervene in some supernatural way to make Jesus King. But that didn't happen, at least not as they imagined it. How could they have imagined the way of God – the resurrection which changes everything.

Non-violence is as difficult for us as allowing ourselves to be last. When someone ahead of me at Farmer's Market gets the last bunch of biodynamic kale, it is hard for me to be non-violent. I don't mean that it's hard not to physically punch her out, but it's hard for me to restrain from sending her lots of attack thoughts. When the same person does it again and again I build up a head of resentment and my inner attacks on that poor woman get louder and louder. I even give her a name in my mind. And it's not a pleasant one. I may be physically restrained but I am still busy attacking.

Non-violence is a lot more than just not carrying a gun and not hitting people you don't like. It's about finding creative ways to resist oppression but not give in to the dominant system. The dominant system says that resources are scarce and we should get as much as we can for ourselves and do whatever it takes to get maximum power and wealth and security. The kingdom of God says all good things come from God who loves us unconditionally and the more we share the more there is to go around. As disciples of Jesus we choose to make do with less, we choose to love rather than to hate; we choose to resist non-violently because to fight is to give in to the violence and hatred which feeds the sin matrix.

Jesus gave his life for us. The verse here says "he gave his life a ransom for many." He gave his life in order to show once and for all that the sin matrix cannot defeat God and so God raised him from the dead and in our baptism we are joined with him.

We are marked as Christ's own for ever. We are joined with him in his death and raised with him in his resurrection and we are made with him the servants of all. I don't think that it's an accident that in this passage Mark has Jesus connect images of the eucharist and of baptism – our two great sacraments – with his words about service. "whoever wishes to become great . . . shall be your servant" and "whoever wishes to be first . . . shall be slave of all".

Jesus gave his life in service to us. We are to give our lives in service to others. That is what it means to be in right relationship. Not that we ignore our own needs but that we hold others in equal importance. That we live simply and humbly in a way which enables others to live to their fullest as well. That can be hard. Sometimes allowing someone else to find fullness of life means that we have to let them go in some fundamental way. Those of us who are parents know that dilemma so well. In order for our children to grow up they have to live their own lives with their own mistakes and tragedies and their own joys.

Being a servant to others doesn't mean always being the one left holding the ball when everyone else goes home. It certainly doesn't mean making yourself into a martyr. Sometimes serving others is holding

them accountable for their responsibilities; sometimes it means going home when you're tired; sometimes it means letting someone else help you.

Just as ambition is an inner attitude, so too is non-violent resistance and so too is service. We tend to think of service as an active doing, and it often is, but prayer is just as much service as making chicken soup or cleaning the toilet. When we are living in faith community as servants of one another then we will find ways to be of service and to accept another's service.

And when that happens we will be imitating the life of the Trinity who are bound together in mutual love, joy, service and praise. And we will be joining in the great dance of the cosmos and taking our rightful place in the reign of heaven. Our place is not on thrones either side of the Son of God; our place is either side of him in the soup kitchen, either side of him in the playgroup, either side of him at the hospital bed, either side of him in the workplace.

We are the ones who have heard the call to join in the great work of redemption. And we are the ones who are learning to be Jesus' disciples and to follow him in service and non-violent resistance. And we are the ones who share in his resurrection life.

Alleluia!