

Mark 10:35-45
October 18, '09

“DOWNWARD MOBILITY”

DO YOU REMEMBER THE THEME SONG FROM THE SHOW “THE JEFFERSONS?”

“WELL, WE’RE MOVIN’ ON UP, TO THE EAST SIDE...

TO A DELUXE APARTMENT IN THE SKY.

MOVIN’ ON UP, TO THE EAST SIDE.

WE FINALLY GOT A PIECE OF THE PIE.

FISH DON’T FRY IN THE KITCHEN;

BEANS DON’T BURN ON THE GRILL.

TOOK A WHOLE LOT OF TRYIN’

JUST TO GET UP THAT HILL.

NOW WE’RE UP IN THE BIG LEAGUES,

GETTING’ OUR TURN AT BAT.

AS LONG AS WE LIVE, IT’S YOU & ME BABY,

THERE AIN’T NOTHIN’ WRONG WITH THAT.”

THIS IS PERHAPS THE ULTIMATE SONG OF “UPWARD MOBILITY.”

IT’S THE AMERICAN DREAM.

IT’S WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT “GETTING AHEAD.”

AHEAD OF WHAT?

AHEAD OF OTHERS.

WE THINK OF IT IN FINANCIAL TERMS, OR SOCIAL TERMS, OR EDUCATIONAL TERMS.

WE TALK ABOUT CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER OR WHATEVER LADDER HAPPENS TO BE NEARBY.

WE PLAN TO “GET AHEAD” – WHATEVER WE THINK THAT MEANS.

WE WANT THINGS TO BE “BETTER.”

WE WANT THINGS TO “IMPROVE.”

WE WANT TO “SUCCEED.”

WE STRIVE FOR “UPWARD MOBILITY.”

IT’S THE AMERICAN WAY, ISN’T IT?

WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY THESE TERMS, THOUGH?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THINGS TO BE “BETTER?”

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THINGS TO “IMPROVE?”

WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF “SUCCESS?”

THIS PASSAGE IN MARK’S GOSPEL ADDRESSES ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS.

THIS IS A VERY DISTURBING PASSAGE.

IT LEAVES US FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE.

HERE YOU HAVE JAMES & JOHN, THE SONS OF ZEBEDEE – “SONS OF THUNDER” JESUS CALLED THEM – ASKING JESUS A RATHER PREPOSTEROUS QUESTION.

FIRST OF ALL, THEY TRY TO TRICK HIM WITH AN OPENING QUESTION – A SET-UP IF YOU WILL.

“JESUS, WE WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR US. WE WANT YOU TO GIVE US WHATEVER WE ASK YOU TO DO.”

NOW, AS THEY SAY, *JESUS’S MOMMA DIDN’T RAISE NO DUMMIES!*

HE’S NOT ABOUT TO WALK INTO THAT ONE!

I’M AFRAID NOT EVERYONE HAS BEEN AS WISE WHEN FACED WITH SUCH A REQUEST.

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A FATHER WHO WAS TRYING TO BREAK THE NEWS TO HIS CHILDREN THAT THEY WERE GOING TO BE MOVING TO A BRAND NEW CITY, MORE THAN 500 MILES AWAY.

ONE OF THE CHILDREN PUT UP A HORRIBLE FUSS & SAID, “*I’LL ONLY MOVE IF YOU’LL GIVE ME WHAT I WANT.*”

IN EXASPERATION, THE FATHER CONCEDED.

MOM WAS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED TO SEE THAT HER LITTLE 9-YEAR-OLD SON WHOM SHE HAD FEARED WOULD BE TRAUMATIZED ABOUT THE IMPENDING MOVE, WAS SUDDENLY VERY AGREEABLE & EVEN ENTHUSIASTIC.

IT WASN’T UNTIL THEY HAD MOVED INTO THEIR NEW HOME THAT LITTLE DREW SAID TO HIS VERY SURPRISED MOTHER, “*SO WHEN DO I GET MY NEW DOG?*”

SOME OF US HAVE TO LEARN THE HARD WAY NOT TO BE WILLING TO SO EASILY AGREE TO A DANGEROUS, OPEN-ENDED “ANYTHING I WANT” REQUEST!

JESUS DID THE SENSIBLE THING.

HE ASKED THEM WHAT THEY WANTED HIM TO DO.

AND HERE’S WHERE THE REALLY DISTURBING PART OF THE PASSAGE COMES IN.

WHAT JAMES & JOHN ASK JESUS IS, “*GRANT ONE OF US TO SIT AT YOUR RIGHT & ONE OF US TO SIT AT YOUR LEFT IN GLORY.*”

THE QUESTION IN ITSELF IS OUTLANDISH!

BUT CONSIDERING THE FACT THAT THIS IS IMMEDIATELY AFTER JESUS HAS – FOR THE THIRD TIME – PREDICTED HIS OWN DEATH – IT’S EVEN MORE RIDICULOUS!

IT’S AS IF JAMES & JOHN HEARD ONLY THE BEGINNING & ENDING OF HIS WORDS.

IN THEIR MINDS, THEY PUT TOGETHER THE WORDS “JERUSALEM” & “SON OF MAN” AND BEGAN TO PICTURE A RISEN, RULING, POWERFUL LEADER.

YOU SEE, THEY THOUGHT ONCE THEY REACHED JERUSALEM, JESUS WOULD BE ENTHRONED AS KING & THEY WANTED TO GET THE JUMP ON EVERYONE ELSE BY ASKING FOR THE POSITIONS OF HONOR IN HIS KINGDOM.

THIS IS DISTURBING, ISN'T IT?

IT'S DISTURBING TO US & IT WAS EVEN MORE DISTURBING TO THE OTHER DISCIPLES.

THEY WERE ANGRY AT THE BROTHERS FOR MAKING SUCH A REQUEST.

THE PROBLEM, THOUGH, IS THEY WEREN'T ANGRY BECAUSE OF THE INAPPROPRIATENESS OF THE REQUEST.

THEY WEREN'T ANGRY BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO BECOME SERVANTS.

THEY WERE ANGRY BECAUSE JAMES & JOHN HAD BEATEN THEM TO THE PUNCH!

AFTER THREE YEARS OF TRAVELING WITH JESUS, AFTER HEARING HIM – TIME & TIME AGAIN – TELL THEM WHAT WAS IMPORTANT IN LIFE – THEY STILL DIDN'T GET IT – NONE OF THEM DID!

NOR DO WE.

AND PERHAPS THAT'S WHAT'S MOST DISTURBING ABOUT THIS PASSAGE.

WE STILL HAVE OUR MINDS SET ON A DISTORTED UNDERSTANDING OF SUCCESS & POWER & "MAKING IT" & "UPWARD MOBILITY" AS THE GOAL OF LIFE.

JESUS TURNS THINGS UPSIDE DOWN & WE STILL CAN'T SEEM TO GRASP IT.

IT DISORIENTS OUR THINKING, DISTORTS OUR PERSPECTIVE & WE STRUGGLE TO SEE THINGS AS JESUS SAW THEM.

IN HERMANN HESSE'S LITTLE BOOK, JOURNEY TO THE EAST, HE TELLS THE STORY OF A BAND OF MEN ON A MYTHICAL JOURNEY TO JOIN A SPECIAL ORDER.

THE CENTRAL FIGURE OF THE STORY IS LEO, THE SERVANT WHO DOES THE MENIAL CHORES FOR THE GROUP.

BUT LEO HAS AN UNUSUAL PRESENCE ABOUT HIM.

HIS SPIRIT AND HIS SONGS SUSTAIN THE GROUP.

ALL GOES WELL UNTIL ONE DAY LEO DISAPPEARS.

BEFORE LONG, THE GROUP FALLS INTO DISARRAY, AND THE JOURNEY IS ABANDONED.

THEY CAN'T MAKE IT WITHOUT THE SERVANT LEO.

AFTER SOME YEARS OF WANDERING, THE NARRATOR FINDS LEO AND IS TAKEN INTO THE ORDER THAT HAD SPONSORED THE JOURNEY.

THERE HE DISCOVERS THAT LEO, WHOM HE HAD KNOWN FIRST AS A SERVANT, WAS IN FACT THE HEAD OF THE ORDER - ITS GUIDING SPIRIT - A GREAT AND NOBLE LEADER.

LEO WAS ACTUALLY THE LEADER ALL THE TIME, BUT HE WAS A SERVANT FIRST BECAUSE THAT WAS WHAT HE WAS, DEEP DOWN INSIDE.

LEADERSHIP WAS BESTOWED UPON A MAN WHO WAS BY NATURE A SERVANT.

IT'S SO HARD FOR US TO GRASP THIS CONCEPT.

IT'S HARD FOR US TO CHANGE OUR THINKING THAT IS SO DEEPLY INGRAINED IN US.

WHEN JAMES & JOHN MAKE THIS REQUEST OF JESUS, HE ASKS THEM IF THEY'RE PREPARED TO ACCEPT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WHAT SUCH POSITIONS WILL ENTAIL FOR THEM.

THEY RESPOND WITHOUT REALLY THINKING OF WHAT IT MEANS.

“SURE, WE'RE READY! GIVE IT TO US, JESUS. LET US BE ON YOUR RIGHT & LEFT HAND IN THE KINGDOM!”

IN MODERN-DAY TERMS, IT'S LIKE A PRESIDENTIAL CABINET MEETING.

THERE SITS THE PRESIDENT IN THE CENTER.

ON ONE SIDE SITS THE SECRETARY OF STATE.

ON THE OTHER SIDE THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE.

THAT'S WHAT JAMES & JOHN ARE ASKING JESUS TO GRANT THEM.

THEY WANT POSITIONS OF POWER, PRESTIGE & INFLUENCE.

THEY THINK LEADERSHIP COMES FROM WHERE YOU SIT – NOT HOW YOU SERVE.

THEY THINK FOLLOWING JESUS WILL PROVIDE THEM WITH PRIVILEGE – NOT CHALLENGE THEM TO SERVICE.

UNFORTUNATELY, THIS IS STILL TRUE TODAY.

WE DON'T GET IT ANY MORE THOUGH THAN JAMES & JOHN DID.

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR, WRITING ON THIS PASSAGE, SAYS, *“THIS MUCH IS FOR SURE – WHETHER WE CAN MAKE SENSE OF IT OR NOT, SERVING IS HOW WE WILL TRANSFORM THE WORLD, NOT FROM THE TOP DOWN BUT FROM THE BOTTOM UP - THE ULTIMATE TRICKLE-UP EFFECT.*

THAT'S THE POWER GOD GIVES US IN ABUNDANCE – THE STRONGEST STUFF IN THE WORLD – THE POWER TO SERVE.”

THINK OF THE IRONY OF THIS REQUEST JOHN & JAMES MAKE.

WHEN JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM, WHEN THE MOMENT COMES FOR HIS KINGDOM TO REIGN ON EARTH, THEY WANT TO BE AT HIS RIGHT SIDE & HIS LEFT SIDE.

THINK ABOUT THAT.

IN JERUSALEM, WHO ENDED UP ON EITHER SIDE OF JESUS?

WAS IT NOT 2 VICTIMS OF CRUCIFIXION?

I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS FOR US AS THE CHURCH – ESPECIALLY AS WE COMPLETE THE “UNBINDING YOUR HEART” SERIES & AS WE CONSIDER OUR CALL TO TELL OTHERS OUR STORY – TO TELL OTHERS THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST.

I THINK WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO SOFT-SELL THE GOSPEL.

WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO TELL OTHERS HOW BELIEVING IN & FOLLOWING THE WAY OF CHRIST CAN ANSWER ALL OUR PROBLEMS & MAKE LIFE EASIER.

WE WANT TO MAKE CHURCH APPEALING & IT'S TEMPTING TO MAKE IT EASY TO BE A FOLLOWER.

A PASTOR WAS TALKING ABOUT A CONSULTANT WHOSE SERVICES HAD BEEN ENGAGED TO HELP HIS CHURCH LEARN HOW TO GROW.

THE CONSULTANT SAID, *"FIRST FIND WHERE PEOPLE ITCH; THEN FIND A WAY FOR THE CHURCH TO SCRATCH THAT ITCH. THE CHURCH IS HERE TO MEET PEOPLE'S FELT NEEDS."*

NOW TO A CERTAIN EXTENT WE CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT ADVICE.

WE *DO* WANT TO BE HERE TO MEET NEEDS THAT PEOPLE HAVE.

BUT I THINK WE HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WITH THAT SUGGESTION.

I THINK IT'S A MISUNDERSTANDING TO THINK THAT PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR A PLACE THAT WILL MEET THEIR OWN NEEDS.

I THINK IT IS A MORE DEEPLY IMBEDDED DESIRE WITHIN US TO FEEL THAT WE ARE NEEDED OURSELVES.

JESUS IS NOT A TECHNIQUE FOR GETTING WHAT WE WANT OUT OF GOD.

JESUS IS GOD'S WAY OF GETTING WHAT GOD WANTS OUT OF US.

YOU'VE HEARD THE OLD SAYING, *"IT'S NICE TO BE IMPORTANT BUT IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO BE NICE."*

JESUS CALLS US – NOT TO UPWARD MOBILITY THAT IS SO MUCH A PART OF MODERN, HEDONISTIC SECULAR SOCIETY.

HE CALLS US TO DOWNWARD MOBILITY THAT IS SO CENTRAL TO BEING A FOLLOWING OF CHRIST.

HE CALLS US TO A LIFE OF SERVANTHOOD – A LIFE OF SACRIFICE – A LIFE OF COMMITMENT.

THINK ABOUT IT – AREN'T THOSE THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER TO YOU?

AREN'T THE GIVERS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED THE ONES WHO STAND OUT IN YOUR OWN LIFE?

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG TEEN-AGER, I ONCE SPENT 3 MONTHS IN SINAI HOSPITAL IN OAK PARK, MICHIGAN.

THE DOCTORS WERE BAFFLED BY MY CONDITION & I SAW SPECIALIST AFTER SPECIALIST.

I REMEMBER THERE BEING ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE WHO WANTED TO HELP ME.

THERE WERE THE DOCTORS & NURSES.

THERE WERE SURGEONS.

THERE WERE INTERNS.

THERE WERE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS & PHYSICAL THERAPISTS.

INTERESTINGLY, THOUGH, I DON'T REMEMBER THE NAME OF A SINGLE ONE OF THEM.

I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT THEY LOOKED LIKE.

I DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING THEY SAID.

THE ONLY PERSON I REMEMBER IS LEROY.

LEROY WAS AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WITH A CREW CUT & A MUSTACHE & A DARK BLUE UNIFORM.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT HIS OFFICIAL TITLE WAS BUT HE WAS THE TRANSPORT GUY.

HE CAME TO MY ROOM EVERY DAY, HELPED ME INTO A WHEELCHAIR & THEN TOOK ME DOWNSTAIRS TO PHYSICAL THERAPY.

I SPENT 10 MINUTES A DAY WITH LEROY – 5 MINUTES DOWN & 5 MINUTES BACK UP.

EVERY DAY FOR 3 MONTHS I LOOKED FORWARD TO MY TIME WITH LEROY BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT KEPT ME GOING.

IT WAS LEROY WHO KEPT MY SPIRITS UP & OFFERED ME HOPE & ENCOURAGEMENT & LAUGHTER.

HE DIDN'T HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE, EDUCATION OR SKILLS TO BE A DOCTOR, A NURSE OR A THERAPIST.

HE WAS LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE.

HE WOULD NEVER CLIMB THE LADDER OF MEDICAL SUCCESS.

LIKE I SAID, I DON'T REMEMBER THE NAMES OF ANYONE ELSE IN THAT HOSPITAL BUT I'LL NEVER FORGET LEROY.

FOR ME, LEROY EPITOMIZED WHAT JESUS MEANT WHEN HE SAID, "... WHOEVER WISHES TO BE GREAT AMONG YOU MUST BE YOUR SERVANT & WHOEVER WISHES TO BE FIRST AMONG YOU MUST BE SLAVE OF ALL."

TO A 14-YEAR-OLD BOY WHO FEARED HE MIGHT NEVER WALK AGAIN, LEROY WAS GREAT & IN MY BOOK, LEROY WAS FIRST.

HE KNEW WHAT IT MEANT TO SERVE.

HE KNEW THE CHALLENGE OF A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.

HE KNEW THE JOY OF DOWNWARD MOBILITY. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*