

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Glory of Downward Mobility

Mark 10:35-45

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider and Ed Schroeder

35James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42So Jesus called them and said to them, "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. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

DIAGNOSIS: Going in Our Direction

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Exercising Authority over Others*

Jesus is going to Jerusalem, the capital city, the center of power. No doubt something big is going to happen. Now is the time to make arrangements for when Jesus gets the glory he deserves. James and John want to be seen with him, to be acknowledged as his assistants, to sit with the great. The others are angry at James' and John's audacity-or maybe they are just angry that they didn't think of it themselves first. Even disciples are not immune to the drive to get on top, to join what today we call the culture of upward mobility. Who isn't working hard to get ahead of others, to get authority over others-even in personal relationships of marriage, family, friendships? And when one has gained such authority, who is not tempted to exercise it as Gentiles do (Mark 10:42)? It seems so right, once achieved, to keep it for oneself and to exclude others from sharing in it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Preserving One's Dignity*

Jesus has just finished telling his students for the third time what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem: condemnation by all authorities, mocking, whipping, and killing. If the disciples had understood that Jesus would be lifted up as a sinner and a criminal, perhaps they would not have been so eager to be seen in his company. Who wants to look bad in public? For us who have an upside-down understanding of what Jesus is saying, perhaps Jesus' "promise" that we will share in his "baptism" and his "cup" reassures us that our dignity will be preserved. But we may be disappointed when Jesus adds that the positions at his left and right have been prepared for certain people not chosen

by him. Then, how can we maneuver ourselves into these positions?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Keeping God on One's Side (but not really)*

Or maybe they and we do understand that there is suffering ahead for Jesus. After all, martyrdom can be glorious, too; you can be a hero, a righteous one, enduring everything for a good cause. Then you are certain-in spite of the wounds inflicted by others-that God is on your side. But to be “struck down by God” too (Isaiah 53:4) is to be in hell. This is what waits for Jesus in Jerusalem. In Mark's gospel, the only words Jesus speaks from the cross are: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Such words may lead us to wonder if, when we associate ourselves with this Jesus, we will be God-forsaken too. But it is not our associating with Jesus, so much as our inability to accept a crucified Messiah, that leaves us God-forsaken.

PROGNOSIS: Going in God's Direction

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Being on the Right Hand of God*

God is obviously the one who chooses the people on Jesus' right and left, and God chooses two thieves whose names we do not know (Mark 15:27). Sinners are the ones for whom these places have been prepared. Jesus' authority is an upside-down authority. He supports those beneath him-if you can imagine that-by getting even farther down than they are, in order to ransom them from going under forever. God does not lift Jesus up to God's right hand in glory without cutting off that right hand first (Mark 9:43), casting Godself in the role of a sinner so that many sinners might be “ransomed” (Mark 10:45). God is being God now in a new way.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Becoming a Sinner*

Jesus is quite prepared to do everything for sinners, even to lift them up. But only those who are willing to recognize that they are sinners can hang with him at his right and left and be “baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3). The “cup in the Lord’s right hand” (Habakkuk 2:16) is a cup of condemnation that Jesus drinks dry. When it is refilled by his blood it becomes the cup of salvation for all whose faith makes “his life an offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10). This life that was “poured out” (Isaiah 53:12) has been raised to God’s right hand so that Jesus may be a “source of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Serving Others*

Accepting the label of “sinner” can be disturbingly concrete. It means helping the neighbor, even if one is called a sinner in the process, even if one becomes a sinner in the process, even if one gets in trouble for helping. Using whatever authority one has in an upside-down way-sent out “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45)-might lead one into conflicts, drinking bitter cups, even getting a “blood” baptism. Look what happens to James (Acts 12:1-2) and John (Acts 3-4). But because Jesus drank such a cup and underwent such a baptism, and lived to tell about it, his disciples now have his resources to do so too.