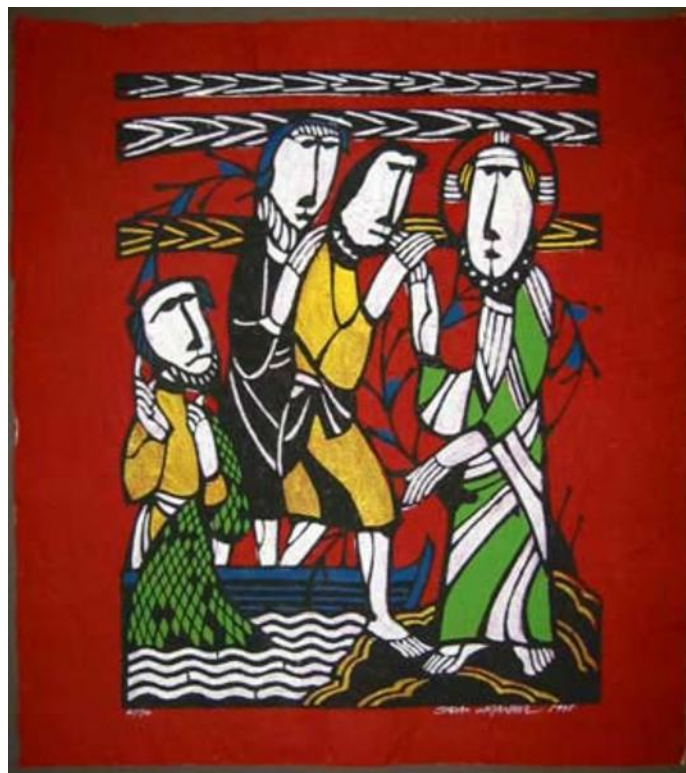


Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – October 20, 2024

Church of the Future

Job 38:1-7, 39-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45



Calling of James and John (Watanabe Sadao, 1975)

Mark 10:35-45 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But 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?” They 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; but 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.” When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So 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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become 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 a ransom for many.”

There is a story in our family that goes back over twenty years, when our daughter Kate was three or four years old. Neither Kate nor I can remember the specific object of her attention, but one morning at breakfast she was adamant: “I need it, Mama!” As we ate, she kept repeating, “Mama, I need it! I need it, Mama!” Finally, I said to her, “Kate, you don’t *need* it, you just *want* it.” To which she replied, “I *need* it betuz I want it!”

I thought of that this week when I read of James and John’s impulsive request in the gospel. “Jesus, promise you’ll do whatever we ask!” It’s a childish demand, for a mystery favor. Then they get more specific – each wants a place of honor at Jesus’ side when he comes into power and glory. It’s an outrageous ask, one that seems steeped in competitiveness and greed.

Why would they insist their status be elevated above the other apostles? It’s one of the reasons why James and John have a reputation as hotheads, the “sons of thunder” who elsewhere in the gospel fantasize about crushing those who merely disagree with them.

But here’s the curious thing -- the context of their request is not a selfish power grab at all. It is born of fear and anxiety. Because immediately before

today’s gospel passage, James and John are walking behind Jesus on the road to Jerusalem when, for the third time, he tells them, “See, when we get to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be handed over to the authorities, condemned to death, and killed. Then, after three days, he will rise again.” It is a confusing and terrifying message and they realize when Jesus won’t let it go that their lives are about to be turned upside down.

So out of fear and panic, James and John grab at conventional security – superior power and status. Even though they are part of a tight-knit, caring community, they think they need a leg up on their companions. You could criticize them for selfishness or ego, and there probably is a bit of that, but I think there is something more significant going on. Rather than asking, “How do I get more than my friends?” I wonder if their deeper question is, “Without Jesus, how can I be sure I am safe? How do I know that I matter?”

Jesus loves James and John and so he doesn’t scold these two hotheads for their absurd request. Instead, he summons them to imagine an alternative community structured by something other than hierarchy and control. He says, “You know that the

rulers in this culture act as tyrants, lording it over those beneath them. You must do it differently. You must become a servant, devoting your life for the well-being of others. That is true greatness.”

You may have noticed the idea of servant leadership mentioned in the news lately, evaluating its effectiveness in business and government. There are a variety of definitions of servant leadership, but the core philosophy is that the most effective leaders strive to serve others rather than accrue power or take control.

Instead of being defined by authority, expertise, or superior intellect, servant leaders are known by their empathy, humility, integrity, and vision. When these leaders put others’ needs first, they empower everyone around them to become their best selves, stepping into positions of responsibility out of fulfillment rather than obligation.

It’s the opposite of climbing the corporate ladder and kicking out the rungs below you along the way. Instead, it’s getting off the ladder entirely to stand on common ground and foster a community of mutuality where the gifts and needs of each person are valued. Where each person

takes their turn in the spotlight and then steps aside so someone else can voice their perspective. A community in which each person is both a giver and a receiver of wisdom and care.

The gospels describe the early church as just such a community. I’m sure it wasn’t perfect – people can be grumpy and annoying in every age -- but their interdependence and mutuality was both their safety and their lifeblood.

Over the last two centuries, as the institutional church aligned itself with dominant culture, religious leadership came to mirror the hierarchy of power and control operative in secular society. Churches were valued like corporations -- for their size, growth rate, product impact, and depth of resources. In some places, it’s still like that.

The media consistently reports on the diminished relevance of religion, especially as practiced by the mainline Christian church. Over the last decade, along with many other Episcopal churches, St. Stephen’s has experienced declining attendance, raising the same questions as James and John, “Are we safe? Do we matter?” But there is a big difference. James and John were uncertain about what comes next without Jesus, while we are uncertain

about what comes next without the church of the past.

And that's the good news. We can let go of longing for the church of the past because even at death, Jesus does not abandon his disciples. He rises as promised and is known to them in a new way. He gives them the Holy Spirit to empower and guide them into a new reality of loving God and loving their neighbor.

A new community of servant leaders is born, characterized by empathy, humility, integrity, and vision. A community of mutuality where giver and receiver cannot be distinguished from each other. That is the original church of the past and it is the model for the church of the future.

Since I arrived at St. Stephen's six months ago, I have experienced an interesting and inspiring paradox. There is sadness over the loss of faithful members of the community and vulnerability in facing an unknown future – and – there is a deep current of affection for each other and commitment to the mission of the church.

Do you remember that paradox is one of our most valued spiritual possessions?¹ The Holy One makes great use of paradox.

In our conversations about where God is leading this community, whether around preschool plans or outreach or worship or music, I have heard people discuss the challenges and risks of change and then conclude with, "Well, what do we have to lose?"

What do we have to lose, indeed, by following Jesus? Everything and everyone we need to grow more faithfully into a community of mutual ministry is here, now. We can trust the Holy Spirit to empower and guide us into a new chapter of loving God and loving our neighbor. We can – and we will -- thrive as individuals and as a community in whatever size and shape God calls us to be.

So, we will listen and we will dream and we will set some goals for what comes next, praying to act with empathy, humility, integrity, and vision. We'll begin today after church. I can't wait to see where we will go!

Amen.

¹ Carl Jung.