

Great Service

Mark 10:35-45

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When my three daughters were younger, this is a typical scenario that would occur at our house. "Girls, we're heading out in a few minutes to go the store." In response, like clockwork, I would hear a voice ring out, "I call shotgun!" If you're not familiar with the term, it was their way of laying claim to sitting beside me in the front passenger seat. Inevitably, when the other two heard this, they would be angry with the sister who spoke up first. Over time, this practice of calling shotgun became quite contentious.

This is what today's gospel lesson brought to mind. James and John call shotgun when they say they'd like to be the disciples seated on Jesus' right and left side in glory.

This tendency to want the best seat, to be in a favored position, is not uncommon. In fact, few of us are immune to this quest for recognition. I recently learned that exactly two months to the day before his death, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached his last sermon based on this text from Mark. King speaks powerfully and perceptively about the human desire to be out front, to be first, and to lead the parade. He therefore calls it the "drum major instinct."¹

It isn't surprising that our instincts lead us to be first, to want the best seat, to call shotgun! Our culture favors and rewards such behavior. Some might even say our capitalist culture defines the purpose of life as being #1, the measure of which includes achieving worldly wealth and power. I've even seen a bumper sticker which reads, "*The one who dies with the most toys, wins.*" The problem is that our efforts to get to the top or to occupy the best seat, or to be first, or to make the most money, or collect the most toys – often result in many casualties of our ambition and desire. It is all too easy to be blinded by our desire to achieve. Many sacrifice their humanity in the process. That is to say, we act in the absence of compassion and love. It is difficult to see beyond this cultural perspective.

The disciples in Jesus' time had the same challenge. Their notions of power included power/strength over, or power/strength against. In order to be on the top, someone else needs to be on the bottom. The disciples had a cultural or worldly understanding of Jesus as King. They wanted him to be the kind of king they envisioned through their cultural lens. The Roman culture was all about honor. They were thinking Jesus was going to be an earthly King, and they wanted their place of honor in his kingdom.

Jesus says: that's not it!

I hope we notice just how patient Jesus is with this request from James and John to be seated at his right and left side. He does not rebuke them; rather he encourages and redirects them, just as he has done with all the disciples along the way. In fact, if you think about the lessons of the last two weeks, Jesus responded with patience when the disciples were trying to prevent the children from coming to Jesus. He reminds them that all should receive the kingdom of God like a little child.

Last week, Jesus loved the rich man even as he told him to sell what he owned and to give it to the poor. Jesus loved him even when the man was shocked and went away grieving because he had many possessions and was unwilling to give them up.

The disciples still didn't understand and were "exceedingly astonished" (Mark 10:26 NRSV) when Jesus tries to explain by saying how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the

¹ (Unknown n.d.)

kingdom of God. He points out that for mortals it is impossible to be saved, but not for God. For God, all things are possible (Mark 10:27 NRSV). Still, Jesus patiently explains the reversal of God's kingdom: the first will be last and the last will be first (Mark 10:31 NRSV).

These conversations are happening as they travel toward Jerusalem, toward the end of Jesus' earthly life. In the verses right before today's passage, Jesus explains for the *third time* what will happen once they arrive in Jerusalem: about the suffering and death which will take place (Mark 10:32-34 NRSV).

It is at this point when the brothers James and John come forward to Jesus and tell him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." (v. 35) "Grant us to sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 36).

Patient Jesus gently tells them they do not know what they're asking. "Are you able?" he asks, (and I am adding my own paraphrase here) to suffer and die for this kingdom which is a reversal of the earthly, cultural kingdom you imagine (v. 38)? James and John insist that they are able (v. 39).

These guys with whom Jesus is so patient, never seem to fully understand what Jesus is trying to tell them about the reversal of God's kingdom. And then, somewhere along the way – their perspective shifted. They seemed to have a new understanding of what Jesus said about the Son of Man coming not to be served, but to serve and to give his life for many (v. 45). What's interesting is, in the end, all of the disciples (with the possible exception of John) were martyred for being followers of Jesus.

I have often wondered at what point these disciples who found it so difficult to see beyond the perspective of their cultural understanding of God's kingdom. They eventually not only understood it, but found it so valuable that it was worth more than their own life, just as Jesus did. How did they get there? How can we get there?

Putting our lives on the line is a challenge we hopefully will never face. Being profoundly counter-cultural in our hyper-individualism-driven society of putting God's justice before our individual desire and ambition is challenge enough... challenge enough for a lifetime. It means recognizing the love and grace of God as the true purpose of human existence. It means putting God's kingdom before what we usually think is success.

A primary question to consider here is what exactly is God's kingdom? I personally have found it very helpful to remove the "g" from the word kingdom, and replace it with a dash, like this: kin-dom. Removing the "g" doesn't make a huge difference to the way the word sounds, but it has a huge impact on how we understand it.

In the world of theology over the last several years, removing the "g" has become more and more common. Why? We've had a shift of perspective. Whereas the word "kingdom" suggests a vertical hierarchy, kin-dom suggests a horizontal solidarity or community

For some people, perhaps a growing number of people, the word "kingdom" will never be rid of its unhelpful connotations. The word has accumulated a lot of baggage over a long period of time. It is understood to be giving quite the wrong message to those who are seeking to understand the faith they are tentatively making their own.

The idea of "kingdom" has left a legacy of colonialism, imperialism, sexism and racism, all of which demean and destroy God's people and God's creation. The metaphor of kin-dom, on the other hand, allows us to envision an inclusive community, built on common humanity and shared values.

Another way in which kingdom and kin-dom differ is that kingdom operates on the assumption that if one individual or community gains something, another individual or community ends up

losing. Such a worldview can breed mutual suspicion between different communities and engender violence.

In contrast, the kin-dom of God is built not through competition but in mutual cooperation and solidarity. People who are part of the kin-dom use their resources and privilege to advocate for others who are less privileged. There is an emphasis placed on a relationship of mutuality.

I suspect Jesus' criticism of the power structures of his day, coupled with his patience with his disciples (and with us) might help us see a broadened definition of God's kin-dom as "kin" or family extending beyond blood relationships. Unpacking these contrasts may just help us think differently about how to be church in the world.

Our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, as well as our church, First Church of West Hartford, are already living out this changed perspective. I will draw our attention to three ways that we do this.

The first way in which we participate in God's kin-dom is being an "Open and Affirming" congregation in which we aspire to be welcoming to all and strive to live up to that ideal. Do we always get it right? Of course not. We're not perfect. However, living into the principle of radical hospitality helps us to get there.

The second way in which we participate in God's kin-dom is being a GHIAA congregation. GHIAA is an acronym for the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance. The roots of this organization go back to 1850 when the Young Men's Missionary Society (as it was known at the time) was established out of concern for the plight of the poor and new immigrants in Hartford. Since its founding, the organization has experienced two name changes: The Christian Activities Council and now the Center for Leadership and Justice. The organization has continually reflected on and responded to pressing social issues. Numerous nonprofit organizations have been established.² Most recently in 2015, houses of faith throughout Greater Hartford were invited to establish a broad based social justice initiative for churches, synagogues, mosques and meeting houses. The goal was to build a diverse organization of lay leaders and clergy from across the bounds of race, class, gender identity, religion and geography to build relational power to address social justice issues in local communities.³

After three years of building relationships and learning about the history and practice of faith-based community organizing, this group of diverse faith communities and allied institutions officially launched GHIAA on Oct. 28, 2019. We're about to celebrate the two-year anniversary and the work which has been done is making a difference: in education, housing, healthcare, anti-racism work and in initiatives which passed in the CT legislature, including clean slate and repeal of welfare liens.

We are all invited to participate in the upcoming GHIAA virtual assembly one week from today, as well as participate in the upcoming house meeting listening campaign. Seek out any member of our core team for more information: myself, Bob Sitkowski, Linda Bronstein, Ryan Mannix, Jennifer deSimas, Terry Schmitt, or Lauren Dube.

The third way we participate in God's kin-dom is through the structure of our church. We are a congregation which is self-governing. We are not part of a hierarchical structure. The decisions we make and the ministry which takes place is the responsibility of the members and friends of this congregation. In addition, we are self-supporting. This means that the expenses for running our programs, worship services, library, inreach and outreach all come from those same

² (Center for Leadership and Justice n.d.)

³ (Center for Leadership and Justice n.d.)

members and friends who give their time, talent and treasure. We work together as a team, and rely on one another in this community which we have built together.

Each of us is needed in this church community, which is a microcosm of the larger community beyond this congregation. We have an opportunity here among our fellow congregants to practice not only participating in God's kin-dom, but in creating it.

God's kin-dom has no bad seats; no one comes in last place. God's kin-dom knows no losers. In God's kin-dom we're all sitting shotgun. Amen.

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