

A Servant Church
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For the past several weeks, we have been reading from a portion of St. Mark's Gospel in which Jesus teaches his disciples he must be rejected, suffer, and die. Throughout this section of the Gospel, there is a recurrent pattern: First, Jesus predicts he must suffer and die. Second, his disciples fail to understand why this must be. Third, Jesus teaches his disciples anew the cost of being his disciple. For example, when Jesus predicts his passion the first time Peter objects that Jesus should *not* suffer and die. And so Jesus teaches the disciples: "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

A little later, Jesus predicts his passion a second time. This time all of the disciples misunderstand and argue which of them is the greatest. And so Jesus teaches them that "if anyone wishes to be first, he shall be last of all and the servant of all."

Finally, after Jesus tells his disciples a third time that he must suffer and die James and John come forward and ask for the seats of honor at his right and his left, as if Jesus had said nothing about his coming suffering and death. When the other disciples realize that they have been outmaneuvered, they become indignant. What about us? Shouldn't we have the seats of honor? Aren't we as important as James or John?

At this point, we might expect Jesus to give up on these hapless men who always seem to get it wrong. But Jesus understands the weakness of human nature. And so like a patient teacher, he again teaches them what it means to be a disciple. His disciples are not to be like worldly rulers who glory in their authority. The greatest among them must be the servant of all; for Jesus, the Son of Man, did not come to be served but to serve and give his life in order to rescue us from the powers of sin and death.

Although the disciples misunderstand Jesus, we should not judge them too harshly lest we judge ourselves. For even though the gospel has been proclaimed for 2000 years, we make the same mistake. Like James and John, we long for the seats of honor. Like all of the disciples, we are afraid that others might get those seats instead of us. When such struggles for power occur in the church, whether in the parish or at the highest levels of church administration, we are no different than the first disciples who failed to understand Jesus.

Throughout the summer and fall, my homilies have focused on a single theme: *what must we do if we are to bring the gospel to others, especially to those who have left our Eucharistic community*. Two weeks ago, I listed ten suggestions in the bulletin for reaching out to those who have left us. Today, I give you one more.

If we are to be a vibrant church, we must be a servant church that ministers to the needs of others. If we are to make the church a welcoming community, we must set aside all arrogance and pretense of greatness. We must imitate the example of the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve and give his life for our salvation. For, only when we are a church that serves others will we be a church to which others will return.

James and John wanted the seats of honor at Jesus' right and left. What they failed to understand is that those seats would be the crosses at Jesus' right and left when he reigned as the crucified king on Calvary. What James and John did not understand, and what we must learn, is that if we are to reign with Christ, we must suffer with Christ. If we are to live with Christ, we must die with Christ. To take the seats of honor at Jesus' right and left, we must suffer and die with Christ.

In a few moments we will enter into the mystery Christ's death and resurrection. By this Eucharist, we participate in Jesus' death on Calvary, and we share in the new life of his resurrection. As we enter anew into the mystery of Christ's dying and rising, what happened to Jesus happens to. As we enter into this mystery, we ask for the grace to become a servant church, a servant parish, a church in which the most important serve the needs of the least important. If we have the courage and faith to do this, we will thrive—even if others do not return. We will thrive because we will be faithful to Jesus Christ.