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Mark 10:32-45

THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM IS THE LOWEST SERVANT

The clutch of acquaintances is engaged in lively conversation. At first it appears to be a delightful, friendly exchange. Yet no one is really listening to the others. Each of them is interjecting their own opinion, experience or observation, cutting each other off, speaking over each other even.

Has this ever been you? Someone says something and to you it's just a springboard to say what you want to say. Isn't it in our very nature to put ourselves forward? It's not so far off then when James and John tried to put themselves forward in the Kingdom of Jesus. We might think their request was outrageous –to sit at His right and His left -but it's not so different from the way we all naturally like to dominate a conversation, or the way we think things should happen in the workplace or how we relate to our siblings or our spouses. We even use the expressions “power-struggle and control freak” don't we?

Today, Jesus tells us to take an approach on life that goes against our natural inclinations, an approach that is even the total opposite of political correctness. In fact, what Jesus says could be considered scandalous in our American culture to the point that a preacher is truly almost afraid to preach it. But it's what Jesus says, so we have to say it. Jesus said to the Twelve, *Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.* Yup, that's the word Jesus used, “Slave.” And He means slave. Could there be a more offensive word to our American ears?

Now, surely, Jesus is not condoning the institution of slavery. Nor is He suggesting that you impose slavery on another person. He is demanding that you impose slavery on yourself. In fact, the Greek word for slave suggests that you have no will of your own. Your will is to do your master's will. Do you see how mainstream American culture would consider this to be a horrible religion that tells you to make yourself a slave?

And Jesus says, “Be the slave of all.” Your will is to do everyone else's will provided only that they don't try to displace the will of the Ultimate Master – the will of your Father in heaven. This is what greatness in the Kingdom of Christ looks like. And though this is about greatness in Christ's Kingdom and not merely a social construct, this truth does play itself out socially and visibly. It's how we interact with people in our day to day. The greatest in the Kingdom is the lowest servant.

Does this sound extreme? But it's really no different from when Jesus says, *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever finds his life*

will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. In other words, if the Jesus you believe in doesn't require you to give up everything, then you're believing in the wrong Jesus.

We might find all this hard to accept – we who struggle even to take a back seat in a conversation. How do we even navigate this with all the various vocations and responsibilities God has given us? But then God often brings this very thing on those who follow Him whether we want it or not. Listen again to Mark chapter 10: *“You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered.* As I read these next words I picture Jesus visibly shaken, hardly able to get the words out between sobs. *Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”*

Even at that moment, as He spoke those words, this dear Savior who takes no pleasure in our pain already knew what would be required of them – that James would be imprisoned and beheaded by King Herod; that John in his old age would be exiled on a cold and lonely island called Patmos. And what will be the cup you drink? A cancer? A wayward child? Countless unappreciated hours? A life that did not at all turn out the way you had thought? Yet none of this earns for you a place at His right or His left. His Kingdom is given to you by grace. But this suffering is necessary to help stymie and shut down our own self will, to make room for His grace.

Jesus does not ask us to do anything that He Himself did not willingly do. Jesus once said, *I did not come to do my will, but my Father's will.* He knows what it is to submit. There's a swear-word in our culture: submit.

The great irony of this reading from Mark chapter 10 is that the disciples' request for greatness in the Kingdom is bookended by Jesus explaining His own self-chosen slavery – a slavery that serves our best interests rather than His own. Here's what we read at the beginning: *Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.* Jesus finished His lesson on greatness in the Kingdom with these words: *Even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice not just when He died but also while He lived. His every earthly moment He set aside His own will to serve us because His heavenly Father's will was to save us. With great exertion and meticulous care He lived a sinless life to earn our way to heaven. He assumed the role of the lowest human who has ever lived by taking the blame for our sin as He suffered the judgment of God on the cross. He paid with His life to atone for us and to ransom us from death and judgement. He became the lowest slave. Therefore He is the greatest in the Kingdom of God. The greatest in the Kingdom is the lowest servant. And that servant is Jesus.

It is by His own sacrifice, His servanthood, that Jesus gives the Kingdom to us. And as He gives the Kingdom to us – which He did in Baptism – the same Lord who calls on us to sacrifice lives, give us our lives back again! Trusting in Chief Servant we receive every gift from God – a new lease on life, rescue from death, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of our bodies, the status of royal cabinet members in His holy administration. He supplies us so well and with such eternal and everlasting, indestructible gifts that we truly can follow Him by making ourselves the slaves of all without any fear or misgiving that we'll lose anything.

Martin Luther made this point once when he preached about the Lord's Supper: *“Now this is the fruit, that even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, ‘Take, eat and drink:’ and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words... We must take and repeat them to our neighbor, not by the mouth alone, but by our actions, saying, ‘Behold my dear brother, I have received my Lord; he is mine, and I have more than enough and great abundance. Now you take what I have, it shall be yours, and I place it at your disposal. If it is necessary for me to die for you, I will even do that.’”*

The greatest in the Kingdom is the lowest servant. Jesus, the Son of God, made Himself our servant so that we too would be equipped to become servants, and in the process we become more and more like Him.