

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, June 5, 2016

**We Are Number One, or Are We?**

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

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Mark 10:35-45

Go to any major sporting event and you will probably see the souvenir stands selling those big foam rubber “We are #1” hands and lots of people in the stands will be wearing them and waving them in the air whenever their team does something significant. Certainly a lot of them were in evidence in Charlotte on Super Bowl Sunday last February.

If “We are #1” foam rubber hands had been available 2000 years ago, James and John might have bought them and waved them in the air in front of Jesus. It would be like Muhammad Ali who shouted out, “I am the greatest.”

James and John clearly had big egos and were not shy about it. They thought that somehow or other they ranked above the other disciples.

After all, several times Jesus took them along with Peter to privately do things. He took them to the mountaintop, for example, when Jesus was transfigured.

They thought that they were the top team, #1, and didn’t hesitate to make it known much to the consternation of the other disciples. It was rather like the key campaign aides to a Presidential candidate expecting choice positions in the candidate’s cabinet if he or she is elected.

Jesus had just told the disciples for the third time that he would be killed and they still didn’t understand.

*“We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him and 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.”*

This was not going to be a picnic by any means and the Zebedee brothers couldn’t see that at all.

They went to Jesus and said, *“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in glory.”*

The Zondervan Bible Backgrounds Commentary<sup>1</sup> said, *“The disciples recognize that Jesus is destined for great power and ask for special distinction in his messianic kingdom. When Vitellius accepted the title of emperor in AD 68, he praised his generals and placed them on either side of his ... chair. [According to Psalms of Solomon] ... the Messiah will judge the tribes of Israel, and the disciples may be bidding to share in this messianic authority. Jesus censures the sinful human craving [of James and John] for positions of honor above the others.”*

James and John completely failed to understand Jesus according to William Barclay. *“The amazing thing is not that this incident happened, but the time at which it happened. It is the juxtaposition of Jesus’ most definite and detailed forecast of his death and this request that is staggering. It shows, as nothing else could, how little they understood what Jesus was saying to them. Words were powerless to rid them of the idea of a Messiah of earthly power and glory.”*<sup>2</sup>

Jesus tells them that they have no idea what they are asking for. *“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”* Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm<sup>3</sup> said, *“... in the context of Jesus’ impending death [he] more likely refers to the cup of bitterness and suffering. Jesus himself prefers to forgo this cup yet accepts it as necessary to fulfill God’s will.”*

What James and John were asking for, but didn’t realize it, was to be like the two thieves who were crucified on the right hand and the left hand of Jesus. There was to be no earthly throne with chairs on each side for Jesus’ trusted advisors.

The reference to his baptism *“... recalls the harsh beginning of Jesus’ ministry and anticipates his death and the death of others who will suffer the baptism of blood when they give their lives for the sake of the gospel.”*<sup>3</sup>

The other disciples are angered at the brothers Zebedee for trying to gain a position of power and Jesus responds, *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

According to the Zondervan Commentary<sup>1</sup>, *“To ransom someone or something means to pay a price to secure its freedom, but it is also a biblical image for the*

*redemption of God's people. Isaiah speaks of making the life of the Suffering Servant "a guilt offering", which brings forgiveness for the lives of many ... the death of martyrs is understood to afford vicarious atonement for the people. The difference from Jesus' statement here is that it understands the martyr's death as providing victory over an evil tyrant whereas Jesus' death offers final deliverance from all evil."*

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that his ministry is to be the basis for the disciples' servant-ministry. *"Just as he came to serve, so are we to serve. Of equal importance, Jesus completely overturns all earthly perceptions of power, since he does not base his authority on lording it over others but on serving others."*<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is radically redefining what power is. Certainly leaders and persons in position of authority are necessary but Jesus is telling the disciples, and us, that no matter what we do, no matter what our profession is, no matter what position of authority we may hold, we are called to serve others by participating in the power of God's reign among us. Jesus is proposing a servanthood of all believers.

As his servants we are charged to serve others without seeking glory and personal gain. As Dawn Wilhelm<sup>3</sup> says, *"... the promise of Christ is that his cup is also our cup. As we drink of it and savor the sorrow and joy within it, we will taste his gift of freedom and salvation, in this world as in the world to come."*

**Amen.**

1. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. 1, Clinton E. Arnold, general editor, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002
2. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1975
3. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Preaching the Gospel of Mark, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2008

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011