

# Learning to Serve

*Part 13 in the series Faithful Saints*

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Isaiah 53:4-12, Mark 10: 32-45

## Introduction

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer tells how he was offered the presidency of a small educational institution. He wanted the job, and thought he should take it. Nevertheless, given his Quaker tradition, he assembled a "clearness committee" of a half-dozen trusted friends. Their job wasn't to give advice but to ask honest, open-ended questions, so that Palmer could discern his vocational call for himself.

Halfway through this three-hour meeting, a friend asked Palmer what he would like most about being president. He mentioned several things he wouldn't enjoy, like wearing a tie, at which his friend pointed out that he wasn't answering the question. Palmer paused, thought a bit, then "gave an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it: 'Well,' I said, in the smallest voice I possess, 'I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it.'"

He concludes: "I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence — a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan. Finally, my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up — and cracked me open: 'Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?' By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life." The clearness committee had made things clear, and he withdrew his name from the search.

Indeed, the grab for glory goes all the way back to this week's gospel reading.

## Sons of Zebedee

It features James and his brother John, who are usually described as "the sons of Zebedee." These two apostles are among the first called by Jesus while they were in the family business of fisherman, leaving behind their father. Scholars think that they came from a family that was a bit more prosperous, since they had servants, and their mother, Salome, is listed among the women who supported Jesus' ministry.

Jesus' calls these two brothers "Boanerges" early in Mark's gospel, a word which could mean either "sons of thunder" or "sons of trembling." In the context of the gospel, this phrase is taken to mean they had a volatile temperament, something that is seen when they suggest that Samaritans be consumed by fire, or in their extraordinary request that they make in today's reading.

It does beggar belief that James and John (along with mom who is financing this enterprise?) come to Jesus with a pretty stark ask: Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." I can almost hear the amusement of Jesus following up by asking what it is that they want.

It turns out these volatile brothers want the best places (they think) right next to Jesus, that they see becoming the next King. They, in their own minds, will be the important advisors and wield power that Jesus as the Messiah will grant them.

Remember how this passage started – by Jesus telling the disciples, for the *3rd time* about his upcoming arrest, flogging, death and resurrection. Poor Jesus, nobody is listening to him, but he tries to tell them, hey – You don't know what you are asking. He tells them that they will drink of the same cup of wrath as he will, and that he does not grant those seats, it is for those whom it has been prepared.

Utter chaos results from their ask, as the disciples get mad about the side-run by James and John.

Jesus never saw himself as a mighty King, his images were that of a servant. Jesus explicitly links his own suffering to that described in our other text today from Isaiah – that of the suffering servant ransomed for others.

And so we have the lesson (one more time!) by Jesus – that it is only by serving that you will become great.

### **Serving**

If this were the last sighting of James, there would be no lesson. Fortunately for James, this is not his last appearance in the Bible. Oh, he will next fail Jesus at the garden of Gethsemane when with Peter and John he will fall asleep while Jesus prays that the cup of wrath be taken from him. But he will also show up in chapter 1 of the Book of Acts as one of the disciple present after Jesus's resurrection. And in a turn that show James finally understands the way of Jesus, James will be the first of the 12 disciples martyred at the direction of King Herod.

If we want to take a lesson from James and John, let it be this – if we go on the journey to follow Jesus, we will learn how to serve.

### **Serving Today**

Throughout the church's history, leaders have been called to serve and take care of those in the faith. Our form of leadership in the Presbyterian church goes back to John Calvin, the founder of the church, who brought in lay people to rightly administer the church. This was quite a radical change 500 years ago, from a system where clergy in the Roman Catholic church ran things.

We have elders, deacons and ministers of the word and sacrament, and our system of rotating leadership that is elected by the congregation allows all of you to decide who the leadership will be.

Today we will be discussing the size of those who serve this congregation as ruling elders and deacons. Each of these ministries is important, and everyone who serves the congregation in this capacity has to respond to God's call to serve, and have that calling confirmed by the congregation.

This year has been a tough one for everyone, including those who serve you, as the regular routines of the congregation have been disrupted by the pandemic. As a people with independence and education, we haven't all agreed about what it is that we should do and when. The Session in particular has made, and continues to make, tough calls on how we can be church for everyone while doing our best to keep people safe. They do this work not because they enjoy the power of it, but because it is their responsibility to care for the people of God here at Faith Presbyterian.

Our Deacons are likewise doing their best to minister in this difficult time – by keeping meals going for those who need them, checking on those who don't have a lot of resources.

As we continue through this transitional time, please include your staff and leadership in your prayers, that wise decisions be made in the coming months, and that we all might learn from James the lesson of leading by serving.

In closing, I'd like to offer these words from writer Boris Pasternak

To Be Famous      *Boris Pasternak*

*Creation calls for self-surrender,  
Not loud noise and cheap success.  
Life must be lived without false face,  
Lived so that in the final count  
We draw unto ourselves love from space.  
So plunge yourself into obscurity  
And conceal there your tracks.  
But be alive, alive your full share,  
Alive until the end.*