Sermon for The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, October 21, 2018

Text: Mark 10:35-45
Title: A fair balance

My almost four-year-old daughter has picked up on this idea that winners get ribbons. When racing her younger (and slower) brother from one side of the house to the other, she often celebrates by saying, “I won! I won! I get a ribbon! Soren, you didn’t get a ribbon.” To her credit she often adds, “But I’ll give you a sticker.” I honestly have no idea where this came from – neither her parents nor her school are big on external rewards, and we’ve never given her ribbon – but I’m also not surprised by it. After all, our entire culture is oriented around winning. We glorify winning. Think of how we talk about politics, economic advancement, sports, higher education, celebrity.

And truth be told, this goes way back. As we heard this morning, James and John wanted a ribbon. They wanted to win. The brothers come to Jesus with what is always a great opener: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” (They sound a bit like my daughter.) He responds more graciously than many of us might, “And what might that be?” “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” They want to be shine. To be the best. To be special, chosen, honored. And who are we to blame them? My guess is most of us do, too. Which is part of why Jesus’ teaching on status and success, worth and well-being, growth and generosity are so hard. It’s not that what he says is complex or offensive. It is just so unfamiliar - so different from what we are used to.

Jesus - ever so gently – tells his friends they don’t know what they’re talking about, and then Jesus turns the conversation to the real issue at hand, not winning but leadership, because that is what Jesus has called his disciples – has called us – to be: not simply his followers but also leaders in our communities, people modeling a new way, people living into the Kingdom of God, here and now.

A few weeks ago, I attended our annual clergy conference up at Bishop’s Ranch. Our presenters – professors from the Episcopal Seminary in Berkeley – invited us to imagine a society characterized by the following realities: tremendous economic disparity between the wealthiest and the least privileged; a government obsessed with borders and the movement of peoples; a culture obsessed with racial and ethnic purity; a leader who had attained God-like
status; an alarming lack of rights for women and children; and a willingness to use violence to impose its ideals on citizens and foreigners alike. The speakers were not talking about a contemporary nation or state. Rather, they were describing the Roman Empire in the late fourth century just before its fall.

Though the presenters never posed the question directly, they framed this conversation in a way that invited us to think about where we see these same trends in our world, our country, and our communities. Today’s Gospel does the same thing. Jesus says to his disciples, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” This is a story about Jesus and his disciples, but this is also a story about us. Do we not also know of rulers who lord their authority over others – not only in government, but in the PTA? At work? Maybe some Churches we’ve attended? Our professional organizations?

Look at how people rule in your world, Jesus says. It is not good. “But,” he continues, “it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” This might sound harsh. We might hear being a servant or a slave as, essentially, undesirable. Unpleasant. Difficult. Undignified. Hard. But what Jesus is saying here is, actually, intended to liberate. It is meant to free us from relationships and systems of exploitation and domination, which, Jesus would have us believe, is good news not only for those at the bottom but for those trapped at the top.

Jesus has been teaching a great deal about power and authority in recent weeks, flipping a lot of assumptions on their heads, saying the first will be last and the great will be servants. At the heart of these teachings seems to be a fundamental shift in values. Jesus is reminding us of something we all knew once upon a time but somehow forgot: that we are deeply interconnected, that our well-being and fulfilment are tied to the well-being and fulfilment of those around us, and that we are called to not only respect the dignity of our neighbors but actually, incredibly, to love them. It is because we know this deep in our bones that we are surprised, amused, interested to notice when our four year olds suddenly pick up the harmful half-truths and heresies we seem to have gotten used to, like that only winners deserve ribbons, and then get to decide whether or not to distribute stickers as they see fit. And just as Jesus reminds us of this truth, he invites us to model another way.
Now we know from the first part of this reading that though Jesus says about exploitative leadership “this is not so among you” when addressing his friends that this is still a somewhat aspirational statement. After all, James and John kinda sorta do want to be rulers, and they kinda sorta do want to Lord it over their friends. But Jesus was working diligently with them, teaching them that even though something in them was still attracted to the old ways - still lured by the idea of rising to the top, celebrity, crushing the opponent – they were, together, striving to live in a different way, and that way was slowly changing them, just as it is and will slowly change us.

Just a few years later, these very same disciples will find themselves without Jesus, trying to continue to live in this way, while also inviting others into their fellowship and passing on the good news entrusted to them. It is into this very different context that Paul wrote the letter we also heard this morning to the community of Christians in Corinth, and in it we hear the early disciples continuing to wrestle with these same questions of connection and community. Paul had been authorized by the other disciples, based in Jerusalem, to go out into the Gentile world as an evangelist, but they had one condition: you must take up a collection to support our work here - caring for widows and children, the poor and the sick, those on the margins and other untouchables.

And so, in letter after letter after letter right there in our scriptures, Paul undertakes the first ever Stewardship campaign for the fledgling Church. He reminds his newfound friends that God chose to be poor, to give up God’s glory, for our sakes, and that as we seek to model our lives after that example we are likewise called to give of what we have received on behalf of those with greater need. This is part of how we acknowledge our deep interconnection. The godliness of all. Ultimately, he writes, “it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need.”

As we continue our Stewardship season here at Christ Church, I’m mindful that while we all enjoy a standard of living almost unimaginable for most of the people with whom we share this fragile and imperiled planet, my guess is not everyone here feels their life, their heart, or their bank accounts are particularly abundant. But remember that Jesus is in the business of flipping our expectations on their head, and abundance may not mean what we think it means.

When I moved to San Francisco in 2007, fresh out of college, I had $20 to my name. I didn’t have a bank account. I didn’t have a job. I had a pile of student loans. And I had a big sister willing to feed me and let me crash in her front room until I figured something out. It took
a couple months of making lattes and serving up fresh baguettes at a fancy coffee shop down the street, but eventually I did stumble into a job in documentary filmmaking, which would pay me a whopping $40,000 a year. Only the small non-profit didn’t offer health insurance or other benefits, so I had to cover that. And now that I was gainfully employed, big sister understandably figured I should contribute to the rent, and we agreed to $750 a month. My family wasn’t able to provide financial support once I left home, so this was pretty much it.

And then, it being October when I got the job, I received a letter in the mail asking me to make a pledge to the Church my sister and I had been attending. The Church that would, four years later, sponsor me for ordination. Now it may or may not surprise you, but I was thrilled by this. Growing up without much money, my family hadn’t ever pledged, though I had picked up at some point that being a part of a Church meant that this was just something you did. Worse – much worse – growing out without much money, I’d felt a lot of shame around it. I really credit the Church with helping me let go of that.

Though the campus ministry at my college was largely funded by the Diocese, each year the Chaplain led a stewardship campaign, and because we were all students we pledged things like the hour it took to set up for worship and dinner afterward, the energy it took to print the bulletins. And, though many of us were living on pennies, we were encouraged to make some nominal monetary contribution as well, and I got in the habit of giving five dollars a month. I gave it willingly, joyfully. It was what I had, and I loved the Church, and as I gave – and certainly as I grew in my faith, and volunteered in inner-city Durham, and went on service trips to Central America and pilgrimages to Jerusalem – all of that living a different way stuff - my relationship with money changed, as my relationship with God and my community was changing.

So when I got that letter from St. John’s, I was delighted. I had a real, grown-up job. I could finally pledge! My sister and I spent some time discerning what we could each give. I was somewhat alarmed to realize that, though the Church often talks about giving away 10% of what we earn or have, I actually didn’t have access to 10% of my income once my other obligations were met. So I prayed and thought and talked, and while it felt like a huge stretch at the time, I committed myself to giving $150 a month. It was just $1,800 a year. I figured it would have a nominal impact on the parish’s budget. But it had a huge impact on me.
I received so much from the Church. It was my primary community in a new city. It was the place I made most of my friends and sang in a choir and led a food pantry. And though giving that much actually meant I had little money for dinners out and other forms of entertainment, I was content to live a simpler life. I was content to make those tradeoffs. They were worth it to me. Pledging, I already knew but continued to learn, wasn’t only about meeting the Church’s need. It was about growing in the spirit of Christ within myself. It was about setting aside some of what I’d received, consecrating it for God’s purposes – like we set aside a small amount of bread and wine each Sunday, consecrating it for God’s purposes – and somehow, miraculously, seeing the whole hallowed in the process. It was about making all parts of my life a part of my spiritual life. And, yes, it was about learning to give out of my abundance, even when by the world’s standards that abundance was mighty unimpressive.

As I’ve gotten older, found more stable jobs, given more and more of my income away, and become a priest, I look back on my twenty-two-year-old self with gratitude, because that first real pledge reminds me to keep stretching, keep thinking and praying and talking, inviting others to do the same, as we relate to our money, as we relate to one another, and as we practice living and leading in this strange new way of Jesus. Sometimes the way of faith is paradoxical. Sometimes it turns our assumptions on their head. And in those moments, we can choose to step out in faith, try something new, and notice what happens. We may be surprised to realize we have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Amen.