



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost – October 17, 2021

Scripture Passages: Job 38;1-7; Mark 10:35-45

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Our scriptures this week reminds me of an old story: it goes like this, you may have heard it before:

There once was a man who lived in a two-story house. The house was near a river and unfortunately the river began to flood.

As the river rose, warnings were given via radio, TV, and shortwave. Large jeeps drove through the area to evacuate people. As a jeep drove by the man's house, he was told:

"You are in danger. Your life is at stake. You must evacuate. Get in the Jeep. Let us help you evacuate."

"No," the man replied from his doorstep. "I have faith. I will be ok. The flood won't get me. God will take care of me."

The water continued to rise.

Soon the man was on the second floor. A boat was going through the area and arrived at the man's house. Rescuers made every effort to convince the man to take action so that his life would be saved.

"You are in danger. Your life is at stake. You will drown in the flood."

"No worries," says the man. "I have faith. Everything is ok. Even though the flood is rising, I will be fine. God will take care of me."

The flood continued to rise.

The man went to the roof to avoid the rising water. A helicopter pilot sees him on top of the roof and hovers above the man.

Using a megaphone, the pilot tries to convince the man to grab the rope ladder which was dangling above his head.

"You are in danger. The flood is still rising. You will drown if you do not grab the rope ladder. Let us help you."

"No worries." says the man. "I will be fine. Yes, the flood is higher but I have faith. God will take care of me."

The flood rises. The man drowns.

At the pearly gates, the man says to God: "I had faith. You let me die."

To which God replies: "I sent you a jeep, a boat and a helicopter. What more could I have done for you?"

That poor guy – he was in a different story from the one that the Lord was trying to communicate to him. Hmmm – hang on to that for a moment.

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In chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to die. And, again, they can't, don't or won't register what he's saying. And so, we come to our story: the disciples think they're in the same reality as Jesus, but they're really not – especially James and John. They especially are somewhere in their heads – a place that is not ruled by God's law of love but by a much more human rule.

First, they ask for special places of honor with the result that the rest of the disciples resent their self-interested pushiness – probably because they didn't think to ask first. Jesus' words still haven't sunk in and taken hold yet, so he says as plainly and clearly as possible that to be great is to serve others and that to be first is to be last. It is so hard for them to understand the marvellously and elegantly simple message about Gospel leadership.

You have to wonder, in the face of all the denial going on every time Jesus mentions his impending death – where the disciples have been? Where are they going in their heads? Jesus keeps talking about suffering and death and they seem deaf to his warnings.

I think it must be denial they're stuck in. Their talk of glory immediately after Jesus' anticipation of the cross is nearly impossible to explain as anything other than denial. Maybe they were elated by the impact of their ministry, and so they can imagine no other outcome than triumph and glory. It's not a helpful reaction, and not even a mature one. But it gets worse, . . .

In a time of crisis, when Jesus has just announced that he is going to his death, James and John react or rather pre-empt with an intuitive move to self-protection. Perhaps they do know things are going to get leaner and meaner. Perhaps they're not quite as dim as they seem to be. It would be a natural reaction to the dangerous change swirling around them if so. But what really makes their move sketchy is that not only do they ask for seats of glory, but they do it apart from their companions, as if they believe there won't be enough glory to go around and so they'd better try and get their dibs in first. No wonder the other disciples are angry; they see that James and John are trying to edge them out.

But before we get all judgey about Jesus' crew, I suppose it's only fair to ask whether we are any different? When we feel under attack, or afraid, or anxious, isn't the temptation always to move toward self-preservation, give into our fears about scarcity, and see our companions as rivals rather than as ourselves? If we were in any doubt that we possessed this self-protective impulse I think the early days of the pandemic should reveal the truth of that little self-deception: remember the toilet paper shortages? And let's not even get started about the vaccine/mask wars we're currently living through.

And, of course this attitude doesn't work; it never does. All it does is break friendship, break communion, break communities, societies, and break countries.

But what's the alternative? Well, there we have something distinctive to say as Christians. The alternative is not to accept this narrative of scarcity.

It's to get into the same story as Jesus. To look to God – the sovereign God of all creation as the reading from Job reminds us this morning – the God whose actions are always purposed for good; to look for the one who laid the foundations of the earth, in whom profound generosity is found in giving all the gifts of creation and care for the earth and its inhabitants. God gives provision as we have need of it.

And that's exactly what Jesus articulates: a narrative of generosity, not scarcity; a narrative of service, not power. He says, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” These are not natural moves for us.

Jesus is the one “who is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness.” Thank goodness for that!

And so he invites his followers not just to re-imagine, but actually to redefine their understanding of power, and leadership. In this case he defines leadership as serving the needs of another. Which means that glory comes not from individual accomplishment but from service, and from the free sacrifice of self for another. And ultimately his followers will see just how far Jesus will take this idea of sacrifice - all the way to the cross.

In our most idealistic moments that story sounds great, doesn't it? To be able to serve each other selflessly? To be able to literally set ourselves and our anxieties aside? Then why is it so hard?

Why is it so hard to put someone else, or the common good ahead of my own wants?

Well, I think there are two reasons. First, given the witness of both Scripture and our experience, I think it's safe to say that as a species we are just insecure enough to believe that there is not enough to go around -- not enough money, enough time, enough love, you name it -- and so we seem hardwired to look out for ourselves rather than our neighbor as a survival instinct -- admittedly this comes from a rather pinched world view

Second, we are bombarded 24/7 with cultural messages that play upon this insecurity, intensifying it by asserting that our salvation rests in possessions, or wealth, fame or individual accomplishment. Why else would we pay professional athletes and movie stars millions upon millions while other professions -- much more central to our well-being as we've discovered through hard experience -- like nurses and grocery store clerks and bus drivers, exist on modest or even low wages?

Although we pay lip service to serving others, the fact of the matter is we have an entire culture encouraging us to "look out for number 1."

How can we possibly combat these messages - and our own instincts for survival?

Again, two ideas: First, if we're honest we can probably admit that our stuff hasn't made us any happier. In fact, the dream of extreme capitalism (where growth and productivity are no longer means to an end but an end in themselves) is on the brink of imploding. Household debt keeps rising as we keep hearing in the news, and more and more people are so stressed by trying to "keep up with the Joneses" that they can't even enjoy what they've attained. The fact is, we're forced to admit that the world's route to glory is a dead end.

Second, and on the positive side, I'll bet that we've each had moments where we've experienced the truth of Jesus' words. And I'll bet that those moments have expanded into seasons particularly in the last 18 months of enduring COVID-19. Moments, when we have put someone else's needs first -- not because we wanted to please them or wanted something in return but just because there was simply service there to be performed or a need to be fulfilled.

We've volunteered, or encouraged someone, broken the pain of isolation, helped someone who needed it. I have seen people lift up an important ministry because it was important and not for a direct benefit to ourselves. I've seen people give sacrificially to support others who are in deep need.

And I've seen the result of joining God's story: I've seen people experience the joy of giving ourselves to another.

I know we have – I've heard many of your stories – ears and hands and hearts – offered in the name of Christ. Each of us, as an outworking of our discipleship, has at some point has fought our own insecurity about not having enough by making ourselves vulnerable to the needs of another and found that vulnerability rewarded not simply by the gratitude of the recipient but by our own increased sense of purpose, fulfillment, and courage – and crucially, Christian leadership.

This is the difference that working at living a Christian life and vocation brings. This the difference that getting aligned with God's story - our story and finding ourselves within it makes. The difference between the world's understanding of glory and fulfillment and the one Jesus tells – the one in whose service we find perfect freedom.

Jesus shows us a way – or as the Gospel says - gives his life as a ransom for many – and buys us back out of the devastating cycle of looking for glory, joy, and peace on the world's empty terms by teaching and showing us how to receive by giving, how to lead by serving, and how to find our lives by losing them for the sake of the people around us that God loves so much.

And it's to all this – this fullness of life, this very opposite of scarcity, this very opposite of self-centredness but instead to generosity and to the love of all God's children that are we called. There awaits a community to love us this way and a community that awaits our ability to love others as we have been loved; so that the cycle – or the virtuous circle - of God's love passes on to each generation, the faith that has been given to us.

That's a whole lot to think on for this week.

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