

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Isaiah 53:4-12 Hebrews 5:1-10 Mark 10:35-45
Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 17, 2021 (Traditional)

The disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus has told them repeatedly that he's going to suffer and die and be raised in Jerusalem, but the disciples don't want to hear that. They're still holding onto this hope that he's going to Jerusalem as a revolutionary political leader. That he's going to forcefully kick the Romans out and declare himself a King...a King along the same lines as Herod or Caesar, only better (of course).

James and John, behind the other disciples' backs, ask Jesus to promise them they will enjoy a special place of honor with him when he finally is lifted up to that exalted high position, on his throne. They want to sit at his right and left hand. But Jesus asks them a mysterious question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with my baptism?" It's clear they don't know what he's talking about. Because they answer "Sure. We'll do anything it takes." Jesus answers even more mysteriously: "The cup that I drink, you will drink. And you will also be baptized with my baptism."

Now, from the rest of the story, you and I know what Jesus is saying here...and it's pretty terrifying. He's asking them, "can you suffer and die like me?" And then he confirms it: yes, they will drink his cup; they will be baptized with his baptism.

Jump a few chapters ahead. Are James and John there with Jesus when he is lifted up by the people on his throne...the cross? No: they're nowhere to be found. They want no part of that throne. And who *does* end up on Jesus' right and left while he's pouring out his life from his throne? Two convicted criminals.

Obviously, there's a difference between our ideas of glory and God's. We're used to looking up to see glory. Life becomes a long climb up the mountain to get to the top, like James and John are trying to climb in the gospel. Up there in the kingly palace on the hill is where the glory is, the place to which only the few special people with money and special talents and abilities can ascend. We want wealth and worldly power and (definitely) security. It's really all about security. We want to be assured of our place in this world. We want God to bring us to a beautiful high palace, where we ultimately we don't have to answer to anybody but ourselves. It'd be nice. But scripture uncovers the truth at the heart of it: that life of constantly trying to climb to the top, that need to be in first place, is ultimately driven by fear and insecurity. It's driven by a deep foreboding that even if we were to achieve that glory, we wouldn't be able to hold onto it long. Deep down, we know about death. So it's not so much we're climbing towards glory, it's that we're running from something. And you see how James and John come to Jesus in secret—they go around the other disciples' backs. Fear is what makes us start taking shortcuts around other people.

But here we have Jesus, God in the flesh, who defines glory with nails in his hands. Here's a person whose glory is to empty himself out, whose power shows itself in

answering peoples' needs. Here's a king who is spit on by criminals, a king who's dragged around by soldiers, a king who allows himself to be a punching bag for a crowd of people who are angry at life and God. And we should never forget his challenge to us. "Are *you* able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with my baptism?"

Jesus touches on one of our greatest fears in this gospel: What if, after all this stuff we go through in our lives...all the work, all the responsibilities we take on, the sicknesses, the frustrations, the challenges and failures and successes and deaths...what if after constantly trying to climb up out of all of this stuff you and I experience (and sometimes it feels like life is just about dragging ourselves up a hill) what if after all this, we get to the top... and we see nothing but a cross in front of us?

Jesus speaks those terrifying words: You will drink the cup that I drink. You will be baptized with my baptism. As you look for that beautiful place of security, you still will be dragged around by your responsibilities, you will feel as if you're serving everyone except yourself. Whoever would be first must come last, and be a slave to all. You will struggle under the weight of your life, you will be responsible for your life, and you'll get tired. You will die like Jesus did.

So we have a God who exposes us for what we are. Mortal. Basically self-serving. Fearful. Needy. We ultimately cannot find worth in ourselves...we need someone to tell us who we are and what we're worth. And we Christians admit it. Because while we are struggling with our responsibilities, while we are trying to stay on top of things, while we're struggling for approval, trying to establish who we are and what we're worth...this same God has gone right to the bottom of the pile—to the very place that scares us most. He bows down for us, and becomes our servant. Our God died with guilty criminals at his side. He went down to the place of failure and worthlessness and shame which we fear most in life. And he tells us; now you should know your worth in your Heavenly Father's eyes. He's gone to the deepest pit, he has poured his eternal life out for you there. That's God telling you who you are in his eyes. You are infinitely valuable, infinitely loved.

Each of us is drinking from our personal cup today. Each of us is going home to the same challenges and responsibilities that we left there an hour ago. But in a little while, we are going to come up here and share from another cup. Can we drink from his cup, can we be baptized with his baptism? Yes! We can, and we have. Our loving God is going to speak his promise again to us: my body is your body, my blood is your blood. In the middle of your work, your frustrations, your challenges...God makes your cup his, and his cup yours. You have been buried into the death of Jesus, and you have risen with him. He plants his throne right here, in the middle of brokenness we experience in our lives, and here he's telling you he's all yours. He died, he gave everything away, to serve you. He doesn't want to give you a position near the top of some worldly pyramid. No, the King of the Universe is telling us, "all that I have is yours." He wants you to be completely his. He wants to give you his place with God. He doesn't want us to be his underlings. He wants to be our brother.

It's funny: We think of James and John being so arrogant, having the brass to ask Jesus for the top position on the pyramid, just below him. But really, it's sad because they're asking for so much less than what Jesus wants to give them. With his death and resurrection, he's pronouncing doom on the whole worldly power pyramid—that whole twisted existence where people are climbing over each others' backs to get on top. He says that whole way of life is coming to an end. And for you and me, it HAS ended. That's not our life anymore. In its place now, he gives us the kingdom of God—he makes us citizens of the kingdom, and now we can claim it. We can show who we belong to. Jesus lifts us up to his level and says I don't want underlings, I want brothers and sisters who are so fearless towards life, who are so sure of their future, that they can live as I have shown them how to live.

Jesus embodies the truth that we find our lives by giving our lives away in love. We're built for love, as in servanthood—active love. It's only because the world is broken and we're sinners that we experience servanthood as painful sometimes. But as Christians, we have a strange view of servanthood. We know that to be a servant who follows Christ, you have to be a conqueror first. Before you start, you already have to know who you are. You have to be confident of your position with your maker. You have to know who you belong to, you have to know where you start from, and you have to be sure of where you're going. And here's the good news. The king of the universe shares his cup with us. He's lifted us up in baptism. He's given us final victory. It's a mistake to think that Christians have to come in last all the time. No: we can joyfully **put** ourselves there, because we've won. We can put ourselves last for the sake of others, because we're free.