

Proper 24 – Year B – There Is No Head of the Table

Mark 10:35-45

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

The clergy in our church, and those like ours, dress differently than lay folks, both with our white collars and, most conspicuously, on the altar, where we appear to practice what the rector of the church from which I went to seminary, St. Luke's, in Los Gatos, California, is fond of calling salvation through haberdashery. That love of vestment and ceremony sometimes generates the charge of clericalism – that is, in essence, that the clergy consider themselves better than the laity. Frankly, I'm not even going to try to convince you that the charge has always and everywhere been unwarranted. And when you hear a sentence like "Father isn't going to be happy with that!" Isn't that just about as annoying as "Doctor will be with you shortly"? For the longest time, especially in the church whose center is in Rome, the official teaching was that when priests are ordained a real change takes place in them – a change in their very being. They become, the theory went, in some very mysterious way sort of religious magicians who, by the incantation of a few prescribed words, can, unlike ordinary people, literally change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ himself, and by pronouncing the words "te absolvo" – "I absolve you" – can transmit to a penitent sinner God's own forgiveness.

Heady stuff! But *contrary* to the words of the catechism of *our* church, which we find in the Book of Common Prayer, where it says that there are four orders of ministry, Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Laity, without suggesting that any one of them is better than the others. And all derived actually from our baptism – the source of the most important ordination any of us will ever receive. None of us is God, but it is clear that, with the church's blessing, clergy were often seen as basking in some special way in God's special favor. Now I hope it's obvious that I don't believe in that kind of theology, but I certainly understand both the attraction to us flawed human beings of believing that we can acquire that kind of special status – as well as the resistance that understanding can create in others.

A non-religious setting can teach us something about the resistance I'm speaking of. I was speaking not long ago with my wife, Ann, about my experience in the navy an eon or two ago – and the strange feelings the cast system and rank structure there conjured up in me, where, depending on the number of stripes on our shoulder boards or, for enlisted servicemen, the fact that they didn't have shoulder boards at all, determined who had to salute whom first and who got to be called Mr., and who was called simply by last name – and, of course, who had to use a particular deference in the tone of their speech. You got to hear and to use a lot of "Sir"s in that environment.

Ann clearly topped me by recalling when some years earlier her then husband was a young army officer. She told me how the colonel's wife at the base had insisted that, at gatherings of the wives, the wives of officers junior to her husband, and, of course, they all were, should all rise when she entered the room. This edict provoked a bit of

passive resistance. The other wives simply refused, any of them, to sit at all until the colonel's wife had arrived. Thus none of them had to stand up for her – or *stand* her either, I suspect!

Today's Gospel reading deals with that same not-so-very attractive aspect of our human desire, even need, for status – even if it's a status acquired, like that of the colonel's wife, second-hand – through a relationship with someone else, who truly *does* merit a high standing in the community. That that desire for recognition because of someone else's status comes from two of the closest of all of Jesus' disciples is strong evidence indeed just how strong the desire can be. And surely we understand it. Actually, let's be honest, there is one great advantage of achieving status through the efforts of another. It means we don't have to work so hard for it ourselves!

Last week's reading told us about the rich man who asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Here was a man who already *had* status, a man others could easily admire, a man many would be only too happy to be able to cozy up to in order to share in his good fortune the way a modern-day celebrity might share his own success with a bunch of groupies. So when Jesus tells him that what he really needs to do is to give all his wealth away, well, it's certainly easy for us, in our own very commerce-driven society, with our expectations based on aphorisms like the one that says that the one who dies with the most toys wins – it's easy enough for *us* to understand the man's reluctance to join Jesus in turning the world's values on their metaphorical head. We who accept a desire for that sort of status are as guilty of creating God in *our* image as James and John were, those sons of Zebedee who are clearly very close to Jesus – or as Peter himself was in the scene we heard a few weeks ago in which, after Peter chastises Jesus for talking about his eventual suffering and death, Jesus tells him that he is judging these matters by the world's standards, not by God's.

How important are the trappings of success to most of us? Pretty important, I suspect. And, besides, toys *are fun*. Frankly, we find it so tempting to seek status that, even if we are not in a position to acquire much in the way of material goods, like James and John we'll take that status any way we can get it, and we often get it not through our own efforts but through identification with others – political parties, football teams, even the standing of our employer among our peers. What I think the series of Gospel readings we have been hearing for the past several weeks all have in common is their message that whenever we put *anything* material or worldly between God and ourselves we have fallen into the sin of idolatry. If, like James and John, we worship a God for what he can do for us – in essence, if we treat God like a candy machine that will dispense whatever we ask of him, we, like these two unfortunate disciples, simply haven't been listening attentively enough to the master's words.

Actually, James and John fail on *two* grounds. First, if it is truly important to them that they sit at the head of the table, they haven't understood the depth of Jesus' truly revolutionary message. There *is* no head of the table! Like the field hands in one of Jesus' parables, who receive the same pay whether they have labored all day, or only

during the last hour of it, all are welcome to the same reward. God loves us equally and we're all invited to share alike in his banquet. More important, it isn't where we sit in *God's kingdom* that counts, or whom we sit with. It's what we do *here* – with the lives God has given us. Jesus reminds James and John that they shouldn't be concerned with their place at the head of the table but instead that they should focus on the radical notion that serving *others* is the way of God's world.

One of the great insights of the Protestant Reformation, however, is that we needn't worry every day whether we have done enough to satisfy God. What is wrong about the brothers' request is *not* that they haven't worked hard enough as disciples but that by asking their question they have demonstrated that they simply haven't understood Jesus' message that there is no head of the table – that we share equally in God's largesse – although it is also true that just as Jesus has come to serve others we also should be seeing our lives as opportunities to serve others. Not because it will win us salvation, since that truly doesn't depend on how much we accomplish, but because it's Jesus' *own* way, the *right thing to do*. Now *that* is a *truly* radical notion, isn't it? Try giving *that* message the next time you attend a meeting of shareholders. But it most assuredly *is* the message of the Gospels. And if the disciples James and John *don't* understand that it is, may *we* be among the disciples who *do!* *AMEN*