

Mark 10:35-45 (New Revised Standard Version) James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "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. But 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. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

To Serve Or Rule

In a society that seems to value winning above all else, how high we climb the ladder of success in cultural eyes determines our value. It was not always so. In the past, many here at Westminster Presbyterian Church distinguished themselves as leaders in Topeka's schools, hospitals, businesses, government and legal systems - serving the community as a whole. They believed in working for the common good regardless of whether that good increased or decreased their financial worth.

Over the past several decades, opportunities for all levels of society to "win" in modern terms diminished. Corporations began downsizing and outsourcing upper and middle management jobs overseas and to consultants to reduce the cost of doing business. At the same time, low-paying "service industry" jobs grew. Current literature reveals that many young people with college degrees now experience difficulty in finding a job. Those who took on debt cannot repay it, yet unlike business owners and private citizens, they are not allowed to default. Life looks grim for many whose dreams of winning with a degree from the "right" school have not come true.

Another new reality being played out on life's stage in Topeka and other states is the shift in perspective of servanthood. Many here remember when choosing to be a public servant was admired by others. All knew such a choice was a sacrifice intentionally made to serve the greater good as a gift and sacrifice in terms of salary.

In our current environment, instead of valuing public service, the trend is to see public servants as drains on the economy. Many are retiring or trying to find other work. Being a servant of the people is not seen as positive in a rapidly shrinking job market in an increasingly fractured society.

Yet our Elders and Deacons are not only leaders here but also servants. They give us heartfelt, prayerful effort to serve God and all people. Servant leadership is still central to our call to be members of Christ's Body here. It is a way to live into our hunger and thirst for something we may not be able to name or describe.

Robert Greenleaf in his book on Servant Leadership reveals. "Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world....The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the 'top of the pyramid,' servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible" (greenleaf.org).

This seems to be the same dilemma Jesus faces with his disciples. The Zebedee boys obviously want to lead to gain. Who wouldn't want to sit at the right and left hand of the most powerful person they ever met? To sit next to Jesus would be to

exercise the same immense power Joseph was given by the Pharaoh in Egypt, a story most likely familiar to both. How natural it would be for them to want to lead as they say our society now is very similar to the first century Palestine under empire rule where money and power were all.

Yet notice how Jesus changes the conversation. He redirects the focus from leadership for gain to servant leadership. He asks if they are willing to drink the cup with him. Are they willing to experience public humiliation, physical pain and emotional rejection with him? As only God may give power, not himself, where they sit in the end is not up to him. Are they still willing to follow and suffer with him - to drink the same cup of life?

What if we were walking with the Zebadee boys and Jesus turned to us to ask if we are willing to follow even if it means suffering and loss instead of gain. What might be our answer? For in the current days as less and less people view Christianity as a positive force in our society, we will have to decide who we are and what our focus in life will be. Not deciding is a decision in itself. Shall we commit to “focus primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which we belong” over and above personal gain? Will we choose “to share power, put the needs of others first and help people develop and perform as highly as possible” as individuals and congregation? These are questions to take into deep prayer as well as dialogue with loved ones.

For as our world morphs around us, it will be necessary to be clear about what our choices are as well as our focus. Thankfully, Jesus is always more about the intention of our hearts than about successful, measurable outcomes. To their credit, the Zebadee boys answered with a resounding “Yes!”. What about us?