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First
Mark 10:35-45
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Before our Gospel reading, a little background. Three times in this Gospel, Jesus has carefully explained to his disciples that he must suffer, undergo rejection by religious leaders, be killed, and after three days rise again. The first time he tells them this, Peter tries to correct him, prompting Jesus to say, “Get behind me, Satan!” The second time, the disciples still don’t understand, and they’re too scared to ask. But they start to argue among themselves who is the greatest, prompting Jesus to say, “Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all.” He even takes a child into his arms to make a point about looking out for those who are most vulnerable and least able to give back.

The third time Jesus predicts his suffering and death, he has just recently encountered the rich young man who couldn’t give up his wealth. He has assured his disciples that they will indeed be rewarded for all they have sacrificed, though it may not look like they expect—and said again, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Now Jesus and the disciples are headed for Jerusalem, and on the way, he stops and takes the 12 aside and says a third time, “Hey guys—this is where we’re headed. This is what’s going to happen. I will be handed over and condemned to die, I’ll be mocked and spit on, and flogged, and killed, and after three days, I’ll rise again.”

Let’s find out if the disciples have learned anything yet, as we listen for God’s word to us in today’s reading from Mark 10:35-45 . . .

James and John. Bless their hearts. Here’s Jesus, teaching them yet again about his suffering and death, and here they are, trying to call shotgun for the best seats in the house when all that gory stuff is past and Jesus reigns in splendor in the coming kingdom. The other

disciples aren't any better—they get MAD when they find out what they've been up to, quite possibly because they didn't think of it first. And I think it just goes to show how HARD it is to break out of this “me first” way of seeing the world, where some seats are always better than others, and somebody is always ahead of us—further up the ladder, closer to the front, etc.

I confronted this in myself on my recent journey to Israel and Jordan. [I'm still suffering from unusually bad jet lag, so I hope I'm making sense as I speak today.] I experienced it in little tiny ridiculous ways, like when we'd check into a new hotel. I'd look out the window of my room and notice that my view was blocked by the patio of the dining room or something, and I'd wonder if the other people on the tour scored a better view than I did. Even though we were hardly ever IN our rooms, and there was ample opportunity for marvelous views of things when we were out and about during the day.

I experienced this in a bigger way as I interacted with the people in our tour group, which was a group of about 70 mostly retired, very successful people, most of whom are members of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, which has four campuses throughout the Kansas City Metro area and 22,000 members. They probably have more ministries, more Bible studies, more small groups, and more mission work flowing out of their congregation than all the churches in Topeka combined.

Their founding pastor is the now-world-famous Adam Hamilton, who seems to publish a new book at least once a year, and seems to be the real deal. He is not a greasy televangelist, but an outstanding, visionary teacher and authentic man of God. When Adam wants to do a book and sermon series on the life of King David, he goes over to Israel with a guide and a film crew, which is what he happened to be doing while we were on our tour. We met up with him one night for a lecture, where everyone commented on how good he looked, because he'd just lost a

bunch of weight, though he was never a heavy guy. So not only is he authentic, gifted, and successful, he's also really lean.

Eventually, the people in our tour group found out that I was a Presbyterian minister, and I started to get questions like, "Oh, how many members do you have?" "How big is your youth group?" "How many services do you have?" "How many pastors are at your church—are you the senior pastor—oh, you're the only pastor! Oh, good for you." "So, Sandra, what is your church doing for an evangelism program? What are you doing to reach young families?"

And I have to say, it was a little hard to hear all of their well-meaning questions without feeling a little defensive. I felt like a corner bookstore being compared to Amazon. When I was brutally honest with myself, I had to admit that the questions stung because they struck at every insecurity I have. I am proud of the people of this church, proud to serve this church, and full of hope for the future, but in my darker moments, I wonder, what if I'm not as competent as I think? What if I just don't have what it takes to help this church turn around? What if our Presbyterian denomination declines so much that I can't make it to retirement working full time for a church? Even the disciples of Jesus wanted recognition and reassurance, as most of us do. Even pastors crave a certain amount of security and success.

Well, I did not enjoy the way I was feeling. The point of this trip was to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. So I prayed, and prayed hard.

After a while, a funny thing happened. I started getting to know the people in my group a little more, and then a little more, and pretty soon I found myself caught up in listening to their stories. I met at least three different people who were still raw from recent divorces, and parents who were worried about their adult children, and aging adults dealing with aging parents, and aching joints, and before I knew it, I was so focused on listening, and comforting, and

encouraging, and helping where I could, not as a pastor but just as a fellow human being, that I forgot about comparing myself to anybody. I still had to bite my tongue every now and then, but it got a lot better.

And I thought, that's what it means when Jesus keeps coming back to talking about service, and being a servant. It's not about serving in order to become great, but that in serving, the hierarchies we construct flatten out, and as serving others takes up more and more of our focus, there just isn't much energy left for jealousy, or self-preoccupation, or anxiety about the future. And some of you already know this, and didn't need to hear this sermon at all, but I want us all to ask, what would it mean for us to truly become not just individual servants of God, but a servant church?

I love our new mission statement, "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." I think each part is ripe with meaning, but especially the last part, living with purpose. As we think about our purpose, we are instructed by Jesus' purpose, which he clearly states in Mark 10:45—"For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." To serve, and to give his life—that was Jesus' purpose.

Now, I've been part of the life of this church for over four years now, and I know that you have felt some of the very same insecurities that I have. You see all the cars in the parking lot at Fellowship Bible Church and Topeka Bible Church, and you hear about their big youth groups and programs for families, and wonder how we could do that here without actually changing the way we worship or revising our theology. You remember the days when the whole sanctuary was full for multiple services, and there were not one but two associate pastors to handle all the needs of this congregation. We'd like to have that top-notch status again, wouldn't we? Truth be told, maybe we'd rather have that than actually be a servant church.

Jill Duffield, editor of The Presbyterian Outlook, got my attention with her comments about this week's Gospel reading. She said:

When was the last time you asked Jesus to make you a servant? When was the last time you heard a prayer in worship that said something like: God, take away our status and our power, make us the least and the last . . . Sometimes I think about what might happen if we printed mission statements like that on our bulletins. Maybe, "First Presbyterian Church: Striving to be last." How about instead of First Presbyterian Church, we call ourselves, "Least Presbyterian Church?" We talk about servant leadership, and we often seek to serve, but rarely do we seek to be a servant.

I believe that it is precisely in being a servant church that we are freed from worrying about the future, comparing ourselves with other churches, and fretting about what we don't have. If we focus on serving the people within and among and around us, without keeping score, putting their well-being above our survival and desire to succeed, I really believe that is the golden ticket. That is abundant life. We'll talk a little more about servanthood and what it means to be a servant church next week, when we hear the story of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus.

I'll close with a story about another experience I had in Israel. One morning in Jerusalem we went to the Western Wall. That's the famous wall that still stands after the ancient temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. This was one of the holiest of all the holy places we visited. You have to go through security to get in, and then once you're in, the women go to their part of the wall, and the men go to the men's side, which is a little bigger than the women's side. You can look at the other gender's side, you just can't go there. On their side, the men were busy laughing and whooping it up, because there was a bar mitzvah going on, and that's understandable because it's probably a pretty big deal to have your bar mitzvah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

On the women's side, there was no messing around. They were there to pray, and it was serious, holy business. They would wait their turn to get right up to the wall and once they got there, they touched it and kissed it and prayed. Many older women had pulled up chairs, as if to spend the day. I had to really be patient and work to get through the crowd to the point where I could even just reach out and touch the wall a little bit. When I did, I realized I hadn't thought at all about what I'd pray for, and here I was, at this very, very famous holy site, where it is said that the divine presence has never departed. I didn't want to dilly dally, because so many people were waiting behind me for their turn. So in my rush I prayed for peace, because somehow you can't be over there and not pray for peace.

But then I prayed for our church. "Please bless my church," I prayed. You see, you all went with me on this trip, whether you knew it or not. I thought about you all the time. But something about my prayer wasn't right—it felt small and a little selfish. I found myself saying, "No God—not my church--bless YOUR Church. The whole thing. Every congregation, everywhere. Peace, and Your Church." That was my prayer. Wrapped in that prayer was the heartfelt longing for health and wholeness and new life for our church, but also the willingness to have our church be whatever God needs it to be in this time and place. And I believe God needs us to be a servant church here in Topeka. And it starts with each of us adopting a servant mindset.

Whatever anxieties and inferiorities you may be carrying with you today, I invite you here and now to lay them down. Name them, then let them go. You do not need them. Then look around for someone who is hurting more than you, and find a way to serve them.

Let us pray. Gracious God, what a wonder you are. You grace us with vivid blue skies, radiant autumn sunsets, fertile land, and wide open spaces. You give us people to love, to listen to, and to serve. You give us more gifts than we know what to do with. You surround us with

your loving care and protection when life punches us in the gut. And when we are at our lowest and least lovable, you remind us that even then, your divine image lurks inside of us waiting to shine.

Jesus, time after time after time, you patiently hung in there with your disciples when they didn't get it. We thank you this day for all of the servants out there who persevere in their work, even when we make it hard for them. We thank you for teachers who keep going, spending their own money on snacks for kids, showing up day after day despite disrespect from students and their parents. We thank you for police officers and emergency workers who see things that would give the rest of us nightmares. We thank you for the people who cut our hair, flip our burgers, bathe our aging parents, pick up our trash and deliver our mail. Watch over them, provide for them, and give them joy and pride in their work.

Holy Spirit, thank you for this church—YOUR church. We have our own ideas of what the future should look like for us, yet we humbly surrender to your vision and your plans for us, whatever they may be. We pray for all of our neighbors who need to hear the good news that you love them, and they are made in your image, and the world needs them and their gifts. We give thanks for the immeasurable gift of your Son, Christ our Lord and Savior, who lived and died and rose again and guarantees us neither status nor worldly success, but real, abundant, everlasting life. For this assurance, we give you thanks, and we wrap this prayer and the many prayer requests in this room in the prayer that Jesus taught us, praying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen!