

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, October 18, 2015)

Text: **Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)**

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."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Service, Please"**

*The reflections began with a comedic sketch between our liturgist,
the Reverend Lorraine Cenicerros and Pastor Donald.*

Donald: Hey Lorraine! You know, I have worked hard to get where I am. And I feel I deserve only the very best and I am determined to get it, no matter what!

Lorraine: I hear you, Donald, but what can I do with the gifts God has given me? I know my limits, but maybe there is some way I can be of help to someone else.

Donald: Oh listen! You've got to watch out for Number One - that's you, of course. Don't worry about others. Let them take care of themselves. And if they stumble and fall, it's not your fault. They made their own choices. You don't need to feel badly for them. Just take care of yourself.

Lorraine: Oh Donald... I don't think I can live like that.

I admit, I can't make everything right, but I know that there is something that I can do for someone. Yes, it's true. We make our choices and are responsible for them, but in the meantime, isn't it important to reach out and help where we can so that the choices available for others may be more full?

Donald: Oh brother! That's the old goody-goody stuff again. This is a dog-eat-dog world, Lorraine, and you had better get used to it.

Lorraine: (slight pause) Is there some way I can be of help to you?

Donald: Oh, I don't need anything from you. You have nothing to offer me.

Lorraine: Well, perhaps you need a friend, or maybe just a smile?

[smiles at Donald]

Donald: Don't try to con me with the nice smile. It won't work.

Lorraine: Why not?

Donald: Because it just makes me wonder what you really want.

Lorraine: Just to be your friend.

Donald: Why?

Lorraine: Why not?

Donald: You don't want anything from me? Just friendship?

Lorraine: Yep. That's it. Friendship.

Donald: [smiles] I guess that's OK.

Lorraine: [smiles back at Donald] Kind of nice, isn't it?

Donald: Yes. It is.

Lorraine: Good. Then, we are friends. Thanks for the gift of your friendship. I appreciate it. [holds out her hand for a shake]

Donald: You're welcome. [they shake hands]

Thanks for yours also.

[speaking to congregation]: To be a friend.....what a novel concept! Not to manipulate or control or dominate, not to compete, just to be a friend. This new friend of mine, looks like a person who cares about others - expecting nothing in return. Interesting. I have a lot to learn.

"Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

That's the quote you may have seen in the About Our Folk epistle this week or projected at the beginning of our service. It's something Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said and as I ruminated on his thought and on our scripture and theme for today I was struck by how much we complicate our ideas of what serving truly means and all the ways in which we put stumbling blocks in our way when it comes to serving.

Because here's the thing - all God truly wants from us is a heart open to the call from Christ and a willingness to humble ourselves and respond when the need arises. This isn't about doing more than we're able or feeling less-than when we can't; it's about discerning the Spirit's call and as Dr. King said having a, "heart full of grace" and a soul generated by love.

Too often I have found myself stymied by my own feelings of guilt or that big heavy sword of SHOULD and found that I ended up hurting more than helping because I wasn't so much following the Call of Christ as I was the siren sound of guilt that comes from a very different place indeed.

I remember another sketch I did way back when in a theatre troupe that was telling the stories of service workers in other nations across the world. In that sketch, an American service worker was working so hard to help the people of the small African village that she was serving that she realized she was letting her own ego of thinking she knew the best way to serve get in the way of the solution that the villagers were discovering in working with her. Her conclusion and the name of the sketch? "Don't just do something. Stand there."

How quickly we forget where we're going and who we are following just as the disciples forgot in today's text where they were going as they make their way to Jerusalem and the events Jesus told them again and again they were about to experience. Instead, they get all wrapped up in trying to figure out who is the greatest among them. Who, in today's parlance, is Jesus' "bestie."

We witness their egos taking charge over their spirits. Christ's call to follow and listen is given up to their own selfish interests and desperate need to secure a place for themselves in the hereafter.

In much the same way, we so often get sidelined by our own ego's restless nature, looking out for ourselves and for our own interests. We don't hear the call to serve or see the need we can fulfill because we're so busy making sure we are okay and that our place is secure either here on earth or in the forever after.

And at the basis of it all? Why, FEAR, of course. Fear promotes selfishness and a grasping for security. How many times do we check our bank balances or think about who might be able to lift us up if we fall down?

And when we're abiding in fear you know what's left by the wayside? Faith. For when our ego is dishing out fear, our faith is relegated to the background and the people and situations surrounding us sink into that background as well as we make sure WE are taken care of and everybody else is on their own.

I wonder... do we only trust God as far as we can throw our faith?

As our UCC commentator, Rev. Kate Huey, wrote this week, the great progressive theologian Marcus Borg speaks of this kind of dying to our egos as, "a metaphor with two meanings, both at the core of Christian faith: "a dying of the self as the center of its own concern" and "a dying to the world as the center of security and identity."

She also notes that another marvelous theologian, Charles Campbell, "suggests that humans have made many mistakes by reacting to fear and seeking security, even violating many of our most important values and beliefs. We want to make sure that, no matter what happens, our place and our safety are secured; if we know that, we think we can handle whatever comes. Campbell observes that Jesus actually reassures the disciples that, in spite of their fear, they will measure up in the end."

But, boy, does that take faith. How far will our faith take us? How willing are we to listen to the Call of Christ and take the time to discern it faithfully rather than react out of fear or guilt or old tapes of our fathers, mothers and guardians playing over and over and over again in our heads?

Many of us – of YOU – have responded so faithfully to the call to serve in ways that I think we're often tempted to think of as not mattering much. I know I go that place myself. There's always more I could do, I think, more ways I could get out there and get in the trenches and, indeed, there are. But too often I allow those feelings to negate that which IS being accomplished.

God, I think, isn't so much interested in the ways we serve as our openness to serve and do what we can with where we are and with what we're given. The phone call, the meaningful card, the simple exchange of a smile as we witnessed in today's sketch, are all ways of serving that can mean more than you ever know. And the more we do those things, the more we're drawn into a life of service, finding more and more ways to serve and finding that we're given so much more with each gift we give that we are empowered to serve in even more ways we never even imagined.

In looking at today's text, Dr. David Lose asserts that he thinks, "Mark tells [today's] story [the] way [he does] because he knows that Jesus' words – indeed, his whole life! – run contrary to our natural tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life according to the terms of the world and therefore take time to sink in... James and John think greatness comes from status and power. And in response Jesus points out that there is no escaping service. You will either willingly, even joyfully, serve others, or you will become a slave to your illusions that you can be free and secure

your future through status and power (or, in our day, wealth or youth or fame or possessions, and so on.)

"Who will you serve," he asks "– the voices of the culture that say that you can be free – indeed, must be free – on your own and at any cost, or the voice of Jesus that calls you to find your freedom and, indeed, your true self, through service to neighbor.

"I don't know what your destiny will be," Albert Schweitzer once said, "but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Amen.