

# ***Ambitious Servants***

Sunday, October 17, 2021  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
Pastor James Haun

## **Mark 10:35-45**

*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."*

Our Gospel lesson is a popular reading, especially as it concludes with a golden verse from our Lord: *For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.* We also like this Gospel story as it seems to involve a slap-down of some obnoxiously ambitious apostles, James and John—or at least this is how we like to read this passage. We love to see the pompous rebuked! But there is much more to this story than a scolding. Jesus *did* correct James and John, and the passage makes it clear that their ambitious proposal was not right or proper, but there is much more to it all than a scold. We are horrified when we read of James and John's proposal to Jesus, for this seems the height of arrogance, yet as we look at the text, we see that Jesus was not nearly so offended as we are! His response to the two is rather circumspect. This raises some questions, such as, why are we so much more offended than Jesus was by their power-grab, and what gentle teachings of Jesus might we be missing as we race to the end of the story and see it only as a rebuke? There are treasures to be unpacked from this reading that we may have overlooked in the past. Let us take a deeper look.

Why was Jesus less offended that we are? I offer a suggestion which cannot be proven or disproven, but please give it your consideration. Let us think this through together. James and John proved themselves to be very ambitious, and perhaps this was the sort of trait which Jesus was looking for in his disciples. Jesus was rounding up leaders for the monumental task of building a worldwide Church, and such an assignment required bold leaders with great amounts of energy and initiative. Shrinking violets need not apply! Jesus was looking for ambitious men, but we are rather ambivalent about these kinds of people. As we consider this incident, we must also remember that it was one of many times when the ambitious attitudes of the twelve caused conflict. They constantly argued over what should be the pecking order of the group, and Jesus had to repeatedly correct them. Jesus had his hands full as he tried to maintain order among these strong egos, but such were the people he deliberately chose!

Jesus is looking for leaders with some ambition and initiative while we, on the other hand, can be a little too committed to what I call a “convenient humility.” It is easy, and can even be fun, to criticize and resent leaders. The person who steps up to take the lead becomes very vulnerable to being called a pompous know-it-all, criticized for not doing a good job, or accused of only wanting to boss others around. These insults often come from the people who may have been offered to lead, but refused, as “they humbly resist any such positions of authority.” Truth be told, few want to step up to a position of authority as it not only requires much work, but even more significantly it requires taking on responsibility. A regular volunteer can go home at the end of the day. A leader must deal with the situation continually and cannot walk away. My time on fire departments taught me how to pick out the fire chief, without even having to look at the uniforms. Look for the dumbest person in the whole group, and there you will find the chief. Or so it would appear, as the fire chief is the one who makes the big decisions and is then criticized by everyone on the squad. It seems that everyone knows better than the chief, but no one wants to step forward and take his job!

The Church is always in need of more leaders, and we face an ongoing shortage of ambition and leadership. In the world of Christian congregations, one may hear rumors of “church bosses” who like to run the show and make life miserable for others. One can come to believe that the great danger in congregations is the abundance of church bosses, but the real problem faced by the Church is very much the opposite! Certainly, there have been leaders in the family of faith who have gotten carried away with their authority and created problems, but the greater problem by far are the leadership vacuums left when a willing leader does not step forward, and confusion and disorder is more likely. Let me be clear that we have many wonderful and capable leaders here at St. Luke’s, but we can always use more, and this is true of most congregations. There are still tasks and ministries that languish because no one will step up and say, “I can head that up.” Our resistance to taking on leadership may masquerade as humility, but often it is fear. Let us pray for more ambitious Church leaders who dare to make great things happen.

Jesus was looking for ambitious and energetic leaders, but knowing that ambition and energy can lead to problems unless carefully directed, he offered some wise counsel. He wanted to be sure that ambition was not allowed to go unchecked [restrained, controlled] and so he offered two compassionate insights. First, he warned James and John that their ambitions would be tested by fire! *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."* Jesus' *cup* and *baptism* are ways of speaking of the bitter troubles which Jesus would experience which would also be experienced by the disciples. I suppose that every life goal or ambition has much more trouble and hurt involved in it than the beginner realizes. Those of any age and Christian experience can look back over life accomplishments for which they are grateful, and they can also remember the pains and troubles which attaining those goals involved! Jesus warns James and John of the troubles which will lie ahead in Christian leadership. He assures them that these troubles *will* come, and these disciples naively agree to step up to that challenge. *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."* It is actually quite touching to know that James and John would indeed go through all sorts of sufferings for Christ and the Church. James was the first of the apostles to be killed. According to Church tradition, John was the only apostle to not be martyred; however, he suffered so many awful tortures that one wonders if his fate was actually harder than the others.

Jesus also explained that God's will is not necessarily our will, and that the high authority which they sought to hold—sitting at either side of Christ in His Kingdom reign—was not Jesus' to give. *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.* Yes, Jesus was divine, but He had deliberately made Himself a servant. He made Himself as much subject to God the Father's will as any other believer. Jesus Himself was waiting to more fully learn and follow God's plan, and so we are to do likewise. James and John's place in leadership was not Jesus' to fully determine at that moment. In time they would find their place in God's plan, and each would do great things, but only time would reveal God's will.

The Christian is faced with an odd task of joining these two desires which might seem to be opposite and irreconcilable. We are called to be a people of ambition and energy for Christ and the Kingdom. We are to be glad and ready to advance the Church and are urged to dream and plan for that great work. Yet having said all that, we are also to be humble and always ready to do God's will, even when it may bring an end to our plans. Such is the walk of the Christian, and we must not be so hard on ourselves when our noblest dreams do not prove to be God's will. Some are afraid to dream and dare great things for God for fear that these plans will not materialize, and they will be made to feel like a failure. I love to say that we do not fail enough, for it is in constantly trying and often failing that we do great works for the Kingdom and more readily discern God's plan. Let us be more ambitious, and let us teach others to do likewise.

Too often we urge our children to be ambitious in all kinds of school and professional endeavors, but we preach only humility in the things of God. Remember the word zeal? It is a word which we do not use often, and many are suspicious of zeal, believing that it will only lead to troubles. Ask God for zeal and see what happens.

Jesus' initial response to James and John was gentle and reflective, but the environment changed as the rest of the disciples learned of James and John's scheme to seize leadership. *When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.* Now the situation was much more tense. We find Jesus now addressing the very core of the matter. This does not negate anything said previously, but Jesus now wants to draw this conflicted situation to a conclusion. While this sounds like an extremely embarrassing event, we must again remember that the disciples were constantly arguing and scheming over matters of their rank and who would hold what posts of leadership. Jesus gets to the point and first makes this point by using the Gentiles as a negative example. *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."* Don't be like the Gentiles, Jesus is saying, and this argument always had an appeal to the Jews who deeply disliked them. Our Lord points out how the rulers of this world operate. A leader obtains power and then rules over the people. The king is in control and power only flows in one direction. While Jesus speaks of this as ruling as the Gentiles do, it is worthy of note that the Jews didn't think much differently of government in that day either! Jesus is simply explaining the way worldly governments work—but the Kingdom must be different! If we are genuinely to be a better people than the Gentiles, how shall we then rule? The answer is radical. *But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.* Don't try to lord over others. Instead, be servants. This is amazing. How can a ruler be a servant? This goes against our every earthly understanding of government, and rather than soften this teaching Jesus only proceeds to state it even more strongly. *And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.* Be a servant and your place in the Kingdom shall be great. Jesus' accent on this point presents to the disciples a certain new kind of zeal and ambition. Outdo one another in servanthood! Be ambitious to serve.

The point may seem laughable as it flies in the face of all that the world teaches us, but none laughed, for they saw before them One who had always been a servant. Jesus was no mere instructor, reading from the instruction book but not actually doing the hard work. Jesus *was* this servant. Jesus was the servant-leader. He was bold, ambitious, and humble, and his life and witness made it clear that such a combination was possible. And more than the perfect example, Jesus, through this radical servanthood became our Savior. *For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.* The world laughed at Jesus, for according to the world servanthood will only lead to weakness and defeat. Jesus willingly became weak and faced the greatest of defeats and humiliations on the Cross, and God used it all for our

salvation and Christ's triumph over death. His death paid our ransom, as we were held captive by sin and death. His resurrection raised us with Him and eternal life is now ours.

As we speak our nation faces a severe shortage of workers, and all of us have stories to tell of how this has affected us. The shortage is real and a bit scary, but even more concerning is the shortage of ambitious, servant leaders in the Church. Yes, as Jesus demonstrates, servant, ambition and leader do go together. The shortage is real. Let us get over our hang-ups about ambition and step up to the challenges before us, that we might become ambitious servant leaders.