

LIFE AMONG THE GENTILES

Mark 10:35-45

Sunday, October 18, 2009

Rev. James Campbell

We all have guilty pleasures. One of mine is the occasional Friday afternoon visit to the Balcony Bar at the Metropolitan Museum. Above the front doors, in the balcony, one can sit and look down at all the people, while enjoying an appetizer and something to drink. You're even serenaded by live chamber music. It's all very elegant.

Last weekend I was there with a friend who was visiting from out of town. Before settling at the bar to catch up, we decided to see the Robert Frank photography exhibit called "The Americans". But on the way, we got sidetracked and found ourselves in an Italian courtyard that has been literally picked up transplanted to the Metropolitan. Perhaps you know it. My friend and I walked along the balcony, looking down into the courtyard, and imagining what it must have been like to actually live in such a house, surrounded by luxury and servants and all under a sunny Italian sky. Finally I said to my friend: "You know, people like you and me, we were meant to live in a place like this." "Yes, we were", he replied.

It's an old joke between us. We go on and on about being born in the wrong time and place, and under the wrong circumstances. We imagine what it might have been like to have been born into a life of luxury and power. It's a joke, of course. But the joke belies a certain ambition, a certain dissatisfaction with the way things are. You might know what I am talking about. This longing for more seems to be built right into our DNA.

Of course, this desire for power and influence has resulted in some remarkable human achievements... and some remarkable human problems. Some of these problems have exhibited themselves in the church. The late, great Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen said that "the long, painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led."

This temptation to power was present from the beginnings of the Christian movement. We see it in the Gospel today. Two brothers, James and John, were disciples of Jesus. And after following him for awhile, they came to believe that he was the Messiah, the one to route the Romans and reestablish the throne of David. And now they were headed for Jerusalem, where, they

believed, their lives were about to change forever. They felt destined for lives of privilege in a new world order that Jesus was about to establish.

When their excitement had built to a breaking point, they got Jesus off to a corner by themselves and said: "Rabbi, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." That's a little like saying to someone "Will you do me a favor" as if that's really a question. "What is it you want?" Jesus asked. And the brothers replied: "When you come into your glory, we want to share your power, one on your right hand and one on your left."

You have to admire their chutzpah. They saw what they wanted and they asked for it. But when the other ten disciples heard about this, they were angry. I don't think they were angry because they understood Jesus better. I think they were angry because the Zebedee brothers had beaten them to the punch. These ten others were also poor, uneducated men. They too wanted a better life. And like us they realized that there is only so much power and influence to go around.

Lots of preachers and theologians criticize James and John for their brashness; for their failure to understand what Jesus had been trying to say all along. But

what Jesus had been saying to them was hard to understand and accept. These disciples had strong, in-grained notions about what the Messiah should look like. And on top of all of that religious expectation, they were driven, like we are driven, for success and acclaim.

Years ago I worked in a large, affluent suburban church. Many of the people of the congregation were likewise driven for success and acclaim. And the culture of that church was to wholeheartedly support this drive. I will never forget the Sunday that the senior minister preached on this story, but as told by the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's version, it is the mother of James and John who is trying to secure cabinet positions for her sons. And in his sermon my boss defended the mother and said she was only doing what all parents did: looking out for the best interests of her kids. He thought she was perfectly justified in her actions. I remember being rather scandalized by a sermon that seemed to toss the idea of servanthood out the window.

"Jesus, we want to sit on your right and left hand in your glory." Now if ever there was a teachable moment, it was this one. So Jesus engages them with a question: "Are you able to drink the same cup I will and be baptized as I am about to be?" They answered enthusiastically: "Yes Lord, we are able!" But

they had no idea what they were saying. UCC pastor Martin Copenhaver commenting on their enthusiasm writes: "It goes without saying that when James and John made their request they did not envision that the ones who would end up on Jesus' right and left would be hanging on crosses."

Then Jesus turned to the whole group and said: "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 as a ransom for many."

The disciples had such a hard time understanding this upside-down kingdom, and so do we. It's so hard to remember the call to serve when you live among the Gentiles; when you live, as we do, right in the middle of the Empire. The ways of the world; the power structures of the world; the emphasis on youth and beauty and riches and control - are all very alluring. They alluring to me too. But we find, again and again, that when we actually accomplish some of these things, the satisfactions do not last. And before long we are off again

searching for something else to make us happy; something new to conquer. It is an endless and exhausting cycle.

That rich, suburban church I told you about left a very deep impression on me. At first I was impressed with all the wealth and power and influence. I liked my life among the Gentiles, at least in the beginning. I enjoyed the respect and recognition that I received in the community. But I could never make it sync with what I knew the call of Christ really was: "...whoever wishes to be great must be a servant..." And finally, after 3 ½ years, increasingly conflicted, increasingly embittered and cynical, I resigned. And when I left that place, I left the ministry... for ten years.

There was really only one thing that saved me; one thing that redeemed those years. Every Thursday, I would drive a group of these suburban Jr. High students from the manicured lawns of our perfect village to the dirty and barren streets of Paterson, NJ where there was an old run-down building called St. Stephen's Mission. They had an after school program and every Thursday we would help the kids with their homework. In the beginning, it was just part of my job. In the beginning, the disparity between the two towns only made me more bitter. But after awhile, as the months went by;

and then as the years went by; as the children started to know and love me, as I began to love them, something inside of me began to change. I found meaning in service. I found God in their faces. These hard-scrabble kids saved me from a complete disaffection with organized religion. And all of these years of ministry later, I still cannot imagine anything that I have done anything more important than that.

And one more thing: Jesus doesn't just call us to serve, like some master calling for slaves. Jesus calls us to join him in service. And that distinction is more important than I suspect most of the church has ever realized. If we take the Incarnation seriously; if we believe that somehow Jesus revealed God's very nature, then when Jesus said he came into the world not to be served, but to serve, then that must be what God is like. And that must be what we, God's children, are really like. I know that I said that it is in our DNA to seek power and influence; but I suspect it is also in our DNA to love and serve others. I suspect that service is actually part of the shining image of God in us. So the call of Jesus to serve is not some burden to be born. The call to serve actually gives us what we really need. It gives us that abundant life we all seek – that life that all the money and influence in the world can never buy. Thanks be to God. Amen.