

Mark 10:35-45

If I didn't know better, I would think that the setting for our text was Francis Howell North High School in St. Charles, because it resembles the caucus that was held there a week ago Saturday--a near riot breaking out because of people aggressively supporting their candidate over the others. In our text the candidates were James and John and they were pushing their own names up over the others. They wanted to be the Vice-President and Speaker of the House next to Jesus' seat as President. Or something like that. They actually used the terms, "One (of us) at your right hand and one at your left in your glory."

When the other disciples (Peter included) heard what they were doing, they got mad at James and John, and there would have been a brawl--a fist-fight if Jesus had not been there. But we should not be surprised. This is always what happens when you bring politics into the church--Councils, Voters, Boards, Committees--that's what this was...politics: "the application of power, or authority." James and John were wanting a bigger slice of the pie. More power, more glory than anyone else. But Jesus would have none of that among the Twelve. 'The church is not to be organized like a business out in the world,' He said, "But whoever would be great and first among you, must be the servant and slave of all." That is not what James and John were hoping to hear. They had come to Jesus with an unusual request. "Say 'Yes' to what we are about to ask." But hadn't Jesus taught them to pray, "Thy will be done?" Yet here these two disciples are asking Jesus, "Let our will be done. Give us a signed blank check."

What on earth had gotten hold of James and John? What possessed them to ask such a thing? The same thing that possesses us. Pride, greed, wanting recognition. In short, getting rewarded...getting what we deserve for all that we do for God. This is how the world does business. And because we live in the world, this is how we think and behave. We want a paycheck for our time and labor. We want others to take note when we do a good job. We want our "just desserts." It's how our society works.

But it's not how the church works. The church operates with grace. Christians are called out of the world to live within God's mercy. It may be a dog-eat-dog world, but in the church we give up our rights and let others go first, ahead of us. In the world all the teams are clamoring to be in the Final Four, but in the church we do not strive to win over others; we lay ourselves down and let others have the honor over us. In the world we bring our arguments to the courts and let the judge decide. But in the church we lay aside our hurt feelings and forgive as God has forgiven us.

But apparently James and John had been nodding off in the pew while Jesus was preaching. They had put away their catechisms too soon. They were living more like the people of the world than like Jesus' disciples. They wanted what they were entitled to; what they were deserving of--places next to Jesus in His glory, at His right and at His left. Well, the last time I checked, the places on Jesus' right and left were occupied by two thieves. And I'm sure they would have gladly given their spots to James and John, or to any of us.

But even they were not drinking the cup Jesus was drinking. Every year in the Philippines, penitent Christians have themselves crucified for a few hours, after which they are taken to the hospital for medical attention. But just hanging from a cross is not what Jesus did. His cup...the cup of suffering given Him to drink was hanging from a cross to be punished by God for the sins of the whole world. That, and nothing else, is being the servant and slave to all. Jesus is first and the greatest of all not because He is God, but because as God He took the place of His sinful creatures and died the death we all deserved.

So if James and John, or any of us really want what we deserve before God, it's not places of honor next to Jesus; it's a place in hell with Satan. And it's interesting that one of the two thieves understood this better than James and John did. He had a place next to Jesus. But it was no seat of honor. It was a seat of shame and agony. But in the presence of Jesus--listening, really listening to His words, something changed within him. He confessed, "I am getting what I deserve," and then he asked Jesus for what he did not deserve..."Remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

The world operates on the merit system. We earn whatever we get...good or bad. This thief had earned a place on a cross for being a criminal. But now, as a member of Jesus' church through faith, this thief would receive what he had not earned--a place with Jesus in paradise.

To those who trust in Jesus, God operates with grace. This penitent thief was given to drink the cup of mercy. If any of us, like James and John, think we deserve honor and glory for all we do for God, then we are in the world, but not in the church. Because in the church everything is given only by grace.

But if you, like the one thief, confess that you deserve only punishment from God, then rejoice. For God has brought you to this conviction, so that He now gives you not the cup Jesus had to drink, but the cup of mercy...the cup Jesus gave to James and John on the night when He was betrayed...the cup Jesus gives to you here at His altar. It is the cup of forgiveness, the cup of life, the cup of salvation. This cup not one of us deserves, but Jesus earned this cup for you by drinking the cup of wrath and punishment in your place.

Now something happens to us when we drink from Jesus' cup of life. In the morning some of you become different people after drinking your cup of coffee. It wakes you up. It allows you to get through the day. If a simple cup of coffee has that power over us, then consider the power and the effective change within us that Jesus' cup of mercy can give. It doesn't just waken us to a new day. It wakens new life within us. And it gives us the power to live, really live as Jesus' disciples--forgiving others, giving way to others for Jesus' sake. And no cup of coffee can forgive your sins. But Jesus' cup does, for it is the cup of His blood given to you for the remission of your sins.

Now I ask you...would you force a coffee drinker--someone who really needs that cup in the morning--to go without? Would you withhold their coffee from them? Then how can we here at Christ Lutheran Church tell our members who really need Jesus' cup, who cannot go through an entire week without it (and that really is all of us if you consider our sins and what Jesus gives us in His cup), how can we say, "You can only have the cup of forgiveness, life, and salvation every other week? Since Jesus desires to give us this precious cup, who are we to turn His cup away?"

That cup is what the church is all about. The church is the place of mercy, and mercy is placed into Jesus' cup for you. We live out in the world six days a week. The world operates, not with mercy, but with the merit system. What a refreshing thing it is to leave the world for a time each week and come into God's mercy. Here you do not get what you deserve. Here God gives His grace for your sins. Here God forgives, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus drank the cup of suffering for you. And you are forgiven. All of you God forgives for Jesus' sake. Here we do not need to push and shove to get our way, to get to the top, because Jesus lowered Himself to the cross for you. In Him all things are yours. Here you are seated with Jesus not because you ascend to His place of honor, but because He comes down to you. Here you receive, as a thief did many years ago, the promise of a lifetime--the promise of paradise, eternal life with Jesus Christ your Lord. Amen.

