

A Sermon Preached by  
 Fr. Edwin Smith for Proper 24, The Season After Pentecost, Year B  
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 Proper 24, year b

Every one wants to be first – to get the blue ribbon. Years of watching horse shows and soccer tournaments have shown me that no one wants second place. The red ribbon is a bummer. So also the white, the yellow, the pink, and (heaven forbid) the green ribbon. Those are signs you have lost to many young people and their parents.

One clear impression I get from reading the Gospels is that the disciples were not chosen for either their brilliance, their sociability, or for their dependability, either.

Today's passage from Mark is the third in a series where Jesus tells them about the death he is about to suffer.

The first time he told them, Peter began to rebuke him. He'd already recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but Peter wanted Jesus to be Messiah on Peter's terms.

The second time, he no sooner finishes telling the disciples that he will be handed over to suffering and be put to death, and they engage in an argument among themselves as to who is the greatest.

And then, the third time, he has just told them that he will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death.

In fact, he gets very graphic saying, "...and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise."

What happens next is unbelievable. James and John come to make a special request. Jesus is talking about how much he is about to give--his life--and James and John come with a wish list of things they want from him. They want a piece of the action in the glorious kingdom. In the words of David Garland, they want to apply for the positions of Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. They want the blue ribbon.

They are not unlike us. We would like to rule the roost, too. Few are rushing to follow Jesus on the path to the cross, even today. Few are rushing to take up their own cross and join Jesus in his last moments of suffering. As one person has aptly put it, the problem is the cross is often worn, but seldom borne.

And the other disciples aren't paragons of virtue, either. The Gospel tells us when they heard about this, they began to be angry at James and John. One of my favorite versions of this story says they began to become indignant with James and John.

Don't think for a minute that their anger—their indignation--was over the inappropriateness of James' and John's request. No, I think on the evidence, they were indignant because James and John got there first. They were looking at a ribbon that was not blue.

Not a single one of them would have passed up a chance for a place of honor in the kingdom. They were angry because someone else asked first. Like many people, they would rather bear a grudge than a cross.

Hearing today's Gospel passage about the disciples is like dealing with a two-edged sword, because their behavior is so much like our own. We push and shove our way ahead of others, in lines at the supermarket, in jobs and in social groups, too.

Jesus humbled himself for his disciples--his disciples then and his disciples now: you and me. And, we seek honors. He became a servant, and we seek to be served. He became poor, and we seek the riches of the world.

Many years ago, a rider on horseback came across a squad of soldiers who were trying to move a piece of heavy timber. The rider noticed a well-dressed corporal was standing by giving the men commands to “heave.” But, the timber was too heavy for the squad to move.

The rider asked the corporal why he didn’t help them. To which the corporal replied, “Me? Why I am a corporal, sir.”

The rider dismounted and took his place with the squad. Smiling, he said to them, “now all together, men, heave.” The big timber moved easily with the addition of the rider’s help.

Then, the rider mounted his horse, turned to the corporal and said, “Next time you have a timber to move, Corporal, send for the Commander-in-Chief.”

It was only after he was gone that the Corporal and his men realized that the helpful rider was George Washington.

And what is our response to the example of our lord Jesus, who showed us humility, suffering, poverty, and death?

Some years ago I had a long discussion with a Lutheran pastor friend. We observed how much of the Gospel could be summed up in the word, “paradox.”

Being a Christian is to live the paradox. The paradox where the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom; those who mourn are comforted; the meek

Inherit the earth; and those who are persecuted are rewarded in heaven. Where we gain everything by giving up all we have. Where we find eternal life by dying to ourselves. Where we become great by becoming a servant. Where we are first when we are the slave of all.

We live in a society that makes religion a sideshow, where people come to be entertained. Where worship in many places has become a show.

In that context, it is difficult for us to hear of pain, suffering, and paradox.

Leonard Bernstein, the famous orchestral conductor was once asked by a reporter what the most difficult instrument was to play.

Without hesitation, Bernstein said, “second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second fiddle with as much enthusiasm or a french horn or second flute, now that’s a problem. And yet, if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”

You and I are called to play second fiddle. To deliberately choose second, third, or fourth place.

Someone else is first violin, and we all know his name, because we are called by it.