

Mark 10:35-45  
Psalm 104:1-9, 24  
29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

### Living Free

Incipit: The title “Son of Man” is an important title for Jesus in Mark’s gospel. Throughout the bible the phrase “Son of Man” has different connotations and meanings. Ched Myers in his commentary on Mark says one of the ways Mark understands Jesus is as “the true human being”<sup>1</sup>—and in this understanding, Myers uses the phrase “Human One” as a replacement for of “Son of Man” in his writing. That’s how I will read the gospel passage today.

Review: Jesus and disciples have been traveling from Caesarea Philippi in the north, down to Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee, through Judea on the western side of the Jordan River and they’re almost at Jericho where they will turn up into the hills to go to Jerusalem.

[Read Mark 10.35-45]

I have to warn you that following Jesus doesn’t get any easier this week. And I must say that a preacher’s impulse on stewardship commitment Sunday is to make the way as easy as possible. We don’t want to discourage anyone. On stewardship commitment Sunday we want people to come and go rejoicing, glad of heart and generous of wallet.

But you know, this whole section of Mark, from the end of chapter 8 through the beginning of chapter 11, is filled with hard words of Jesus. Last week it was Jesus’ words to the man who asked about eternal life: “Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, then come, follow me.” And the man went away grieving because he had many possessions.

These chapters are also filled with story after story of the clueless disciples.

The sermon I preached last month from Mark’s gospel, following the lectionary, was from Mark 9.30-37. And in that passage the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest and what does Jesus say? “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Well, hello! Here we are one chapter later and James and John are trying to get the goods with Jesus to sit at his right and left hand—the two places of greatest honor. And what does Jesus say? “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

You know, if I were Jesus, I think I’d hire one of those court stenographers to write down everything I said. Then when the disciples ask, ONE MORE TIME, about

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man – A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988, p37.

who is the greatest, I could simply turn to the stenographer and say, “Tell them what I said.”

So here we are, again, listening in on a conversation about greatness—just in case we didn’t get it so well the first time, either.

To talk about greatness, Jesus draws the disciples’ attention to the political reality they all knew—their life under Roman imperialism. David Griffin, in his book, *Christian Faith and the Truth behind 9/11*, reminds us that the rule of the Roman empire was a rule of terror and brutality. Griffin highlights five characteristics of the empire:

1 - the rulers of the Roman empire believed themselves to be divinely appointed (which probably means they didn’t spend much time reflecting on their actions—because if they were God’s man for the job, then what they did was God’s will);

2 - the rulers of the Roman empire used greater and greater “military power to spread and maintain the empire”;

3 - they used “terror, or simply the threat of terror, to intimidate”;

4 - they maintained their hold on a large geographical area by using puppet rulers—who themselves were intimidated by the terror and military strength of the empire;

5 - and finally, the empire (and its puppets) extorted large “taxes in order to enrich the empire’s center and finance its imperial rule.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus and the disciples grew up, worked and lived in an environment of terror, oppression and hardship. That’s the first century reality Jesus sums up by saying, “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 that’s not where greatness is found, Jesus says.

Jesus invites us to make a different choice by resisting the temptation to live as the empire lives by resisting the values of the empire. Choosing to live a different way. By a different set of values. By a different measure of greatness.

Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” That language of “slave” is hard to hear in this passage because of the brutality of the lives of first century slaves and because of our own country’s shameful and ruthless history of enslaving Africans and exploiting their labor to build the economic base of our country. Ched Myers, in his analysis of Mark’s gospel, says that the word “slave” in this passage in Mark “is a euphemism for the political vocation of martyrdom.”<sup>3</sup> Which fits with the last line of what Jesus says: “For the Human One came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” And we know, even if the disciples don’t understand, that Jesus is on his way to be martyred in Jerusalem.

So...“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” That is not the way of the rulers of the Gentiles who are tyrants over the people. People who follow the way of Jesus are called to resist—and to turn to others in service.

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<sup>2</sup> David Ray Griffin, *Christian Faith and the Truth Behind 9/11 – A Call to Reflection and Action*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006, p108.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, p279.

Now there's a way of resistance which is really defensiveness—steeling one's self against another—rejecting their ways, shaking off their influence, refusing their power. But I suspect Jesus is talking about resisting from a place of love. We resist the way of lording it over others—of pushing and shoving to be the first in line—we resist that not out of anger or judgment but out of love. Being open, in fact, to those who choose the ways of the empire—being open to those in whom power has tended toward corruption—being open to them in love. Choosing the way of Jesus—the way of serving out of love for others—including loving others we don't like and even despise.

When we live out of that deep place of God's great love—that's when we're free and when we find greatness.

We're not free when we're at the head of the line—because there's always someone behind us who wants to take our place. And when we're at the head of the line there's a lot we have to hold onto to keep our place—and to keep the other scramblers at arm's length.

We're free when we can let it all go. When we can let go of what we hold on to for security, for self-worth, for status, for respect. We're free when we can embrace what we're afraid of, when we don't have to pretend something doesn't exist because it makes us anxious. We're free when we're not holding on to things or people for what they can do for us. And we're free when we're not pushing things or people away out of fear.

When we can keep our hearts open in the presence of suffering—when we can truly show up and be present—this is the way we are free and this is where greatness is found. When we're free, we're no longer terrorized by the empire and its demands. We are free because we are held by the deep and abiding love of God.

We haven't compromised or traded favors to hold our place in line. When we make those compromises or trade those favors, we end up beholden to others.

Not being beholden to others doesn't mean we stand aloof from others or aren't connected to others. Not being beholden means we can be the most connected to others because we are able to keep our hearts open—we are able to see others in all their holy beauty without worrying that if they get some of God's love and grace, there will be less for us.

But, of course, it's not just about us. Toni Morrison reminds us, “The function of freedom is to free someone else.”<sup>4</sup>

We live in gratitude, we practice kindness, we do justice, we walk humbly with God. And as we serve others in freedom and with open hearts, we create space for more people to be free.

It isn't the easiest way to live—in fact, it's probably one of the hardest—but it's the free-est. We're set free to love God with our whole body, mind and spirit, and to love other people from the deep well of God's great love.

This is when we're truly living free—when we live with our hearts filled with God's love and open to others. This is when we discover the paradox that the more we give away, the richer we become. This is when we discover that holding on to money and power and status and relationships and time and everything else our culture tells us we need to be successful and happy—isn't what makes us free.

Here's a twist on the mastercard commercial for today's gospel reading:

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird – Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, New York: Pantheon, 1994, p193.

new wardrobe: \$15,000  
new car: \$40,000  
new house: \$350,000  
living out of God's love: priceless

The question is before us on this stewardship commitment Sunday as well as each day of our lives: what is it that God is inviting you to give up—to set aside—to lay down—so you can be free? So you can live with your heart open and from your freedom, set others free. Today's a great day to begin.