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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

October 17, 2021

Year B, Proper 24, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 53:4-12](#)

[Psalm 91:9-16](#)

[Hebrews 5:1-10](#)

[Mark 10:35-45](#)

In the name of the One who loves us and gave himself for us: Amen.

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Once there was a group of neighbors who wanted to build a neighborhood pool. So they got together and each pitched in some money. (You might say, they pooled their resources.) With the joint money they bought a vacant lot in the middle of the neighborhood and had the pool and a nice poolhouse put in. They made a plan for paying ongoing dues, and put up an entrance booth with some signs saying “Members only” so nonmembers couldn’t just walk in and use the pool. You had to be a member, or the guest of a member, to use it. And fair enough. This was something they had put in a lot of time and money to do together and it was for them to get something good back out of it. The pool existed for the benefit of its members.

Once there was a group of neighbors who wanted to have a church. So they got together and each pitched in some money. They built a nice building and got together on Sundays to pray and sing. They hired some staff members to lead them in music and teach their children and preach and counsel them when they were struggling. They made a plan for paying ongoing dues, only they called it pledging,

and they put up some signs that said “Members Only,” so nonmembers couldn’t just walk in. After all, this was something they had put in the time and money to do together and it was for them to get something good back out of it. Right?

No! Of course that’s not what God’s church is for. The Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple famously said, “The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet its members.” Now he may have overstated the case a little because there are certainly other organizations out there that are dedicated to serving others. I think of the Red Cross or Doctors Without Borders. But William Temple got it right that the church is more like the Red Cross than it is like a country club or a neighborhood pool. We gather together not to serve ourselves but as a people with a mission, God’s mission, the mission of the Son of Man who came not to be served, but to serve.

James and John, those disciples Jesus nicknamed the Sons of Thunder presumably because they’re so headstrong, come to Jesus with their own interests at heart. I love the way they start off their request because it sounds so much like a cagey child trying to negotiate with a parent. “Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask you.” We’re not going to tell you what we want, just promise you’ll do it. And Jesus, wisely, says, “Well, what is it you want?” They want the two best places in Jesus’ kingdom. They want to sit one on his right and one on his left.

It’s presumptuous—but it’s not so unreasonable, really. James and John have put a lot into this Jesus movement. And now, like any ordinary human beings, they want to make sure they’re going to get something good out of it. They want to make sure all the sacrifice has been worth it.

But Jesus points them to a different way: not sacrifice on behalf of the self, but sacrifice on behalf of others. A life that's about serving, not about being served. He tells them his kingdom means drinking a bitter cup and undergoing a hard baptism. It means the cross. And even though they don't understand it now, they will indeed learn to walk the way of the cross.

Actually, Mark's gospel will give us a clear visual demonstration of what it means to be at the right and left hand of Jesus. When Jesus is crucified, Mark tells us, he hangs there between two bandits, one on the right and one on the left. That's the life Jesus is inviting James and John into—that's the path by which he will enter into his glory. His glory isn't about finery and recognition. It's about servanthood and faithfulness and love even unto death.

Right now in our parish we're in the middle of a pledge campaign. We are asking all our members to pray, and plan, and discern how much money we are each going to commit to the work of this congregation in the year ahead. We want to ask each one of us to give sacrificially—not tossing in a pittance to satisfy a requirement but making a significant offering of the resources God has put into our care. We are pooling our resources. But we're not building a pool for our own members to splash around in. Actually it's our neighbors who we're inviting to God's pool, to the waters of baptism, for anyone who doesn't yet know the love of Jesus and the joy and challenge of following him. We want this place at Mendocino and 10th Street to be not a walled garden for us to enjoy but a launching pad that sends us out on mission.

That doesn't mean we sell off the vestments or cancel the music program or stop doing pastoral care. Beauty and transcendence in worship is one of the primary ways we as a parish proclaim God's glory. Caring for one another is one of the primary ways we show God's love. There are things we do to focus internally on

our own community as well as things we do externally to serve our neighbors and work towards peace and justice. The point is that everything we do as a parish is meant to help us worship God, grow more like Jesus, and share God's love with a world that so desperately needs it.

I hope you'll make a pledge this year. I hope you'll do it with joy in the conviction that God is calling us not to be served but to serve, and to do it together: to be part of a movement that won't end until everyone everywhere knows the love and grace of God.