

“YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE ASKING”

Our scripture lesson today is an interesting one and one that strikes close to home. We all like to be exalted and we all like to be the center of attention and we all like to be “the chosen one”. It is human nature.

When I was a kid Back in the days before car seat laws and seat belts, the “exalted position” was between mom and dad in the front seat of the car when going on trips. I can remember us kids shouting out for that honor. It carried no more responsibility than to be quiet, respectful and to sit still.

At school, of course the best position was to be able to sit at the table with the popular kids. It might have been necessary to have the right clothes, to be good in sports or to be a good conversationalist or share your best lunch items.

You might think that having the prized position ends with childhood, but it follows us throughout our lives and even becomes more important as we go out into the work-a-day world. Who will get chosen to meet with the boss? Who will get chosen to attend the conferences? Who will get the corner office with a view of the city?

Of course, to get these favored positions you must be mindful of those who are more powerful. You must accel at pleasing those who have more power. You may have to do more overtime and do more sweat work. You may even have to congratulate and “butter up the boss” even when he doesn’t deserve it.

As you can see there is generally a price to pay. Jesus asked “Are you able to drink from the cup I drink from,” What Jesus was asking will you be able to suffer death for God and for me? Will you be able to suffer extreme humiliation and degradation without hate or revenge?

Jesus prophesied that they would indeed suffer imprisonment, beatings and even painful deaths for their loyalty to him and to God, but in the end he had to tell them that he was not the master of that table and he didn't control the seating arrangement. That is for God alone.

When I was a Missionary in Africa, I had the only pickup in town. It was a Toyota Land Cruiser, had four-wheel drive and a diesel engine with a snorkel so it could even run with the engine submerged in water which happened at least one time. I had it outfitted with a cage on the back and two benches along the sides because I was generally expected to haul people as well as cargo very often.

One time I was called on to haul the Methodists from the village to District Conference in another small town that I had never been to before. When we loaded everyone up with their baggage, the Pastor presumptuously climbed into the cab and took the seat between Roxanne and me. We prayed before starting the trip as was our custom because traveling was one of the most dangerous things we could do in Africa. I then asked the Pastor if he knew the way to the District Conference. When he told me that he didn't know the road, I knew we had a problem.

I knew I needed a "servant" beside me who could guide me on the winding trails and barely recognizable roads. He would have to guide me around wash outs and be prepared to get out with an ax to cut and move away trees that had fallen across the road. He would have to get out in the mud and turn the hubs for four-wheel drive when necessary. He would have to tell me where the turns were all the way to District Conference. The Pastor was definitely not the man for that job. But it was with great difficulty for me to convince him that his best place was with the laity in the back of the pick-up and that

someone much more equipped for swinging an ax, getting out in mud to switch the hubs and to drag away logs was necessary to be my guide and get the seat next to me.

In Africa, Bishops and pastors tend to pattern their position in society after Tribal Chiefs. And many can become tyrants and abusive in that role. It was a great lesson for the pastor in “Servant Leadership” and not presuming that he should always be seated “at the head of the table”.

A few weeks ago I went to a wedding down state where I acted as the Pastor in marrying the couple. It is an important job, but it didn't entitle me to sit at the head table at the reception. Because of covid-19, everyone was seated at assigned seats. They tried to seat people by families to reduce the chances of the spread of covid-19. It was my luck to be seated with a grandmother, her daughter and four little kids. Needless to say, those kids were a handful for the two of them and the table was soon strewn with coloring books, toys, snacks, juice boxes and they were constantly blowing bubbles. I counted no less than four glasses of water or juice being spilled over the mess that was our table. It certainly wasn't the most exalted seat at the wedding feast.

But I soon introduced myself to the kids, asked their names, and began talking to the parents. I began to help with the coloring, asking about their favorite toys and even mopping up the spills. Being a servant was as fun and rewarding as being at the head table where everyone was so stiff and proper. I was even given a tube of soap water and wand so I could make bubbles with the kids. What could be better?

The Scripture goes on to note that the other 10 disciples were angry with James and John, but why were they angry? Was it because they

had gotten ahead of them in asking Jesus for special favors? Was it because they thought they were more worthy? We don't know, but we do know that Jesus spoke to all of them. He told them that if they want be Great among them, they can't be "lording it over others" or being a tyrant. They must be servants of all and even a slave of all.

Jesus said that "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to be a servant of all and to give his life as a ransom for many. Our responsibility is great if we want to be followers of Christ. And not all of it will be glorious.

John Wesley had a Covenant prayer that he recited at least once a year with his Congregations. I would like us to recite Wesley's Covenant Prayer in unison now:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen