

Mark 10:35-45
October 17, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

In 1830, a group of people met in the town of Hudson, Ohio. They had plans to come to the Kalamazoo area and create a new community. They called themselves “The Kalamazoo Emigration Society”, and over the course of the following year, these pioneers traveled to the Richland area to homestead... family by family.. and they set up farms on the good and fertile soil our surrounding prairies are known for. But *before* they came, the Kalamazoo Emigration Society signed a religious compact agreeing to establish a church here on Gull Prairie. And so, on October 14, 1831, 190 years ago, after settling here, seventeen people met in the log cabin of Corneluis and Mary Northrup with the intention of following through on the promise of the compact.

But there was a problem: the initial idea of this move to Kalamazoo first formed in the minds of those with New England roots and therefore they were Congregationalists but some Presbyterians wanted in on this exciting expansion and development of Gull Prairie, so they joined up with the society. And unlike a lot of other pioneer settlements that were grouped by family ties or a specific religious affiliation, our Kalamazoo Emigration Society was neither. Yes, they were religious but they were predominantly motivated by industry and perhaps they needed the additional numbers and money the Presbyterians could provide. But, whatever the explanation, the question of the denomination of this future church was not settled.

Until that fateful night. I say fateful because, another outcome would’ve meant that I’d be welcoming you to the First Congregational Church of Richland this morning.

So...here they are...in this cabin...perhaps near our village square..17 adults ready to establish a congregation...yet they were not of the same mind. Some stood by their original vision of a congregationalist church, while the Presbyterians wanted their denomination. You’d think with only 17 of them, they would have seen this conflict coming. Or perhaps they did and they were resigned to accepting the result of the vote without argument. But whatever the mindset, the vote came down to a tie, 8-8, with only the moderator—a Presbyterians pastor from Edwardsburg Michigan—being the 17th

person in the room...with his final vote, the rest...they say...is history. The Presbyterian Church of Gull Prairie was formed and began their life together by holding the first worship service on Sunday, October 16, 1831, 190 years ago yesterday.

But the divide between the Presbyterians and Congregationalists—Presbyterians—they called themselves, did not go away quickly and there were frequent disputes. Questions like: What kind of church did they want to be? How would they govern themselves? Would it be a polity of elected elders who made the decisions for the church? Or would it be majority rule in which the congregation would vote on everything? These questions didn't just go away with a single vote. These ways of functioning and the values they reflect were deeply embedded in the hearts of this cleaved group of church members.

And this parallel to today's scripture did not escape me.

Our church's birthday remembrance, with its messy beginnings and the organization of the Christian movement in the time of Jesus had a lot in common. Questions like: Who had power? Who would decide? And if we have an agreed upon leader, who would be next in line? Who's on the right? Who's on the left?

But Jesus dispels the notion that leadership is glamorous, or that it is power-seeking. In fact, he questions whether they really know what they are asking for? Are they *prepared* for it? Unlike the Gentile leaders all around them, who Jesus refers to as tyrants, leadership among Christians calls for humility and servitude. It does not seek power and control. After all, we know that Jesus is put on a cross, with someone on his left and his right. Just, how far are James and John willing to go for leadership?

He tells them "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" therefore whether you are on the right or left side of Jesus, you too are here to serve. And... I'm sure that the first elders of this church learned quickly that it is not easy to be an elder either. Those who take up this responsibility for reasons of vanity or a desire to control, quickly learn that being an elder is to serve the church... and serving is hard work.

But Jesus goes further, when he talks about serving, he isn't so much focused on them serving one another, yes that is important, but the ministry of the church is not to be an insular focus; the church is called to serve a world in need. And this too is no different from our congregation in 1831 or 2021. The world still needs us. But that didn't always hold...human beings can lose their focus, we can give in to ego and the need for power.

There is plenty of evidence of the disciples fighting for power, in the scripture we read today. But it didn't stop with a rebuke. Especially after the crucifixion and resurrection, we can imagine them jockeying for position, the whispers and the undermining. And going through the session minutes, we can see that our forebearers sometimes forgot that their call was to serve and, instead, they got caught up in the petty game of policing one another. Launching charges of impropriety, indecency and immoral conduct:

- A woman was seen “Nightwalking” with a suspicious character
- A man was selling tickets to a ball—where there would be dancing, no doubt—and worse, he was seen selling them on a Sunday.
- And some members were known to partake of “ardent spirits” for non-medicinal purposes.

These are taken directly from the session minutes. And the list goes on...I know some of you are clutching your pearls in horror and while they make us chuckle a bit...in THEIR hearts and minds, these were serious issues of the day.

But, I also wonder how much these kinds of charges against one another are about power. Not unlike the court records in Puritan times, where neighbors brought one another up on—often--false charges, these kinds of aggressions toward one another often have little to do with the accusation and more to do with power-seeking behavior on the part of the accuser. Perhaps there is an underlying land dispute among neighbors or some other grievance that was being acted upon through these public accusations. How many were jailed during the witch trials because they were the object of someone's ire, or they were in the way of someone's ambitions, and the hysteria was an easy net to use to remove them.

And today's church is no different. No we don't shame people in the public square but we can justify our microaggressions towards one another with some accusation we hold in our head when, in truth, there is just something about the other that simply threatens our sense of power and placement in the church. I think churches and individuals are subject to the same temptations as were James and John, they want to be great, they want to be first. Our story shows that James and John are ambitious--not that ambition itself is wrong--it makes a worker work harder to get promoted, a salesperson push to make more sales, a student study longer for better grades, an athlete go through grueling training to claim the prize. Ambition can be like fuel to the heart, for an individual or for a church. Where ambition gets to be a problem is when it makes us self-centered, wary of others, territorial...

It also closes us off to where God might want to lead us. It can blind us to what God can do in our lives and through our lives, because we think only of our selves, we serve only our self. And when we are blinded by power-seeking behavior, we can miss the greater prize. One can be so busy making a living that one loses one's life. We can be so busy seeking recognition that we fail to recognize those most important to us--our family, our friends, our neighbors.

When Jesus confronts James and John saying, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink or be baptized with the same baptism that I am baptized with?" His question is a challenge to be willing to make the sacrifice of self, as he is going to do, to ask not "what is in it for me?" but "what can I do for others?"

What about us? How can we not be so concerned about our own place, but about lifting up our neighbor and serving the world around us? We can remember the words of Jesus, "for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." But we can also call to mind the words of the compact that was signed back in 1830 by those desiring to come to this area: "Those desirous of moving to Kalamazoo, having the good of their posterity, and the community in general at heart: being willing to assist and alleviate a fellow citizen in distress, which is also considered obligatory." They were to be concerned not about their own position but about caring for others. And so may we all.