

“A RACE TO THE BOTTOM”

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
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Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. We are close. We are asking of you many things.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you? What do you want me to do for you!!” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; We can share a baptism but we can’t share other things, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “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 it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

For some weeks now we have been watching the disciples struggle mightily to figure out what it really means to follow Jesus. For the bumbling disciples, it has not been going too well. Today, we have the image of James and John clamoring for an honored spot sitting at Jesus left and at his right. When Jesus asked what they really wanted they said: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” James and John’s very human struggle mirror our own struggle to seek recognition and to feel worthy. Like the disciples, whether we care to admit it or not, we like status.

For example, do you remember what it feels like when you don’t get invited to a party when others do? I often felt in high school that there were people who were getting invited to parties that I did not. One day, I remember being so happy that I was finally invited to a party with some cool kids. However, when I showed up at the house for the party no one was home. I later learned it was all a joke, but it played on my sense of need to feel important.

Like disciples, we are all engaged in some sort of effort to race to the top. Perhaps the ultimate symbol of James’ and John’s zeal to get a prized seat, can be found in the current presidential debate where the American public cheers on their favorite candidate

who is engaged in a verbal boxing match, clamoring to crush their opponent. In truth, most of us want our candidate, engaged in this verbal prize fight, to stomp on the other guy. Oh Jesus, we might say, please “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Help me always to be the one in front. A race to the top.

But Christ is not so much interested in our race to the top but our race to the bottom. As we clamor to sit on Jesus’ left and on his right, Jesus would say that it is not his to grant whether we sit on his left hand or his right but it is for those for whom it has been prepared. In our life what we need to do is drink the cup that he drinks and to be baptized with the same baptism. Both the cup and his baptism point to his Messiahship that is rooted in the suffering of the cross. The cup and his baptism are about sharing in the life of a humble Christ where there is no human condition, no amount of suffering, with which Jesus cannot relate. To walk the Jesus’ way means having deep compassion for the aches and pains of the world.

In Christ, like James and John, we are called to strip away all the bits of status and pomposity to remember we all share a common humanity no matter what our position in life might be. Jesus’ message of humble discipleship is difficult to grasp. As Jesus said we are more at ease placing our trust in rulers and tyrants. We look for leaders who can convey their strength and invincibility. We like it when our public officials boast of their military and economic exploits and show how they are going to get tough on that country or those people or that group or those banks or that special interest group so that all of us will be richer and feel safer. We look for a messiah who will come on a white horse. We reward our knight in shining armor with better poll numbers and our votes. Jesus would not be unsympathetic to our need for strength and security. Since the essence of Christianity has to do with the incarnation where God is deeply involved in human affairs. Jesus would have little patience with Christians who detach themselves from politics and live in a cloistered and an a-political world. But if we are part of the political process, as we should be, as people of faith, we evaluate success differently than might be evident in our political discourse. Jesus said that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

When I was a boy it was common during a movie preview to see a clip from an old Laurel and Hardy movie. Laurel and Hardy always made me laugh. I remember one scene where Laurel and Hardy were trying to leave a hotel lobby. Neither of them could ever manage to get out the door because each gestured to the other one to go first. Hardy would gesture for Laurel to go ahead of him and but then Laurel would instead gesture Hardy to go ahead. And on it went, back and forth as we watched Hardy defer to Laurel and Laurel defer to Hardy but no one could get out the door. I thought it was very funny. I sometimes wonder what the presidential debates would look like if they were not peppered with bravado but with deference. It would be strange indeed to hear the words, after you Governor Romney. No Mr. President, I insist after you. No really, you go first. No after you. What would the world be like if such extravagant deference shaped our political discourse? I think the commentators of all political persuasions would freak out and so would we.

When Christians get involved in politics some folks make a lot of the fact that this country was founded on Christian principles. I think that assertion is debatable. But the most cursory reading of American history would show that Christians had no hesitation in bringing their faith to bear on public life. The Congregational Church, in particular, from the beginning had a lot to say about Christian principles around election time and soon thereafter. Preachers did not cower in their offices preparing pietistic little essays scrubbed of all controversy to keep everyone happy. Instead they boldly made their way into the public square and had something to say.

At the time of our Founders, it was a common expected practice for ministers to preach "Election Sermons," and it was very common for a clergyman (and they were all men) to be invited to give a sermon before the newly-elected government officials. In 1790, The Reverend Daniel Foster, pastor of the First Church in Braintree, Massachusetts delivered his election sermon before Massachusetts Governor John Hancock, and the Lieutenant Governor Samuel Adams, and both houses of the Massachusetts legislature.

In that sermon like so many other election sermons preached at that time, Foster, using the passage from Proverbs 8:16 "by God, princes rule and nobles and even all the judges of the earth", encouraged the elected to govern according to God's ways. In his address to these public officials, Foster did not shy from affirming our democracy as a gift from God. He also offered his affirmation of those who had the courage to assume public office. But he said: "Be not unmindful, sirs, that the eyes of God are upon you in your public capacity: God observes what attention you pay to the concerns of the public to the widow and fatherless, the poor and needy, and the cause of virtue and religion. To him you are accountable, and before his awful tribunal you must soon stand, with the meanest of your brethren."¹ Could you imagine now, a pastor being invited to give an election sermon like that before congress or Vermont legislature?

Fun to think about. Thinking about the words of Rev. Foster, as I listen to the current political discourse, I sometimes wonder what these ads and campaign events would look like if Jesus were running for president. I think that if Jesus were running he would not really care whether you are a Democrat or a Republican. How ridiculous it is when people claim that, if Jesus were alive today he would clearly be allied with one party over another. Such pretension.

But I think that if Jesus was running for president, his multipoint plan would be marked by a spirit of profound humility and servanthood. I think Jesus' plan would have a lot to do with how we humble ourselves in order to use our best thinking, our best economic theories, our best understandings about business and government not as a way to exalt ourselves but to lift up others and empower those on the bottom. I would never claim to come close to the eloquence and substance of Reverend Foster in his address to

¹ <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=60>

the newly elected, but in our time, I am inclined to ask whether the current political debate should be more about a race to the bottom than a race to the top.

If we take seriously Jesus' exhortation to be servants, how might our candidates humble themselves to serve? Watching all these focus groups where commentators probe the thoughts of undecided voters, I ask myself what the conversation would feel like if the very poor and the most humble were the one's asking the questions? I was recently reflecting with my son on the campaign. It struck him that both candidates, when laying out their plans for the future, so rarely talked about the direct needs of the most marginalized. They might talk about the need to strengthen the middle class and the upper class through spending or tax cuts but so little time is spent by either party talking about the very poor. The presumption is that if the rich and the middle class are strong that the poor will benefit. And to a degree that may be true. But I get to wondering what the texture of the conversation would be like if we employed the best blend of free enterprise thinking and government intervention to address the needs of the most vulnerable? People from each party have tools and ideas that could be very beneficial if employed in the right way.

Having lived through a lot of elections, it does not seem to matter much whether we elect Democrats or Republicans or whether the economy is good or bad, it always feels like there is always a growing underclass living precariously on the edge. The most politically palatable solutions which garner votes often don't make a lot of sense for the most vulnerable. Indeed, I noted from the head of the food shelf that just this year their Federal funding for food was cut in half. Housing subsidies are half of what they were four years ago. Even though interest rates are low its hard for new businesses to get credit to invest. How do we encourage investment through thoughtful tax policy and free enterprise to encourage investment in our inner cities and in our poorest rural communities? And it is odd that while candidates boast of their military exploits, so very little is being said about the needs of our veterans who are returning home facing all sorts of challenges to re-integrate into American society. If we are really concerned about the sanctity of life, how do we accord reverence for all of creation and not just some parts of it? Both campaigns are awash in money. But I stop to wonder, what if after the election we would be willing to invest these same amounts of money to help the most vulnerable? After the polls are closed and the commentators stop hawking their poll numbers, what will be the shape of our Christian commitment in public life?

Look - I will never tell you how to vote. Each political party has profound human frailties. It will always be so. Their platforms are filled with holes and imperfections and never can or should replace the Gospel.

But let us never forget that following Jesus is always an inherently political exercise. Jesus wants us to pray deeply about our political decisions. When we drink of Jesus' cup and share in his baptism, we need to cultivate a servant's heart where we have the courage to raise uncomfortable questions and create space at the table for those who often don't have a voice. We must listen to the song that is being sung even when it seems no one is listening. May we be humble instruments of Christ peace where we race to the bottom instead of the top. Amen