

Twenty-ninth Sunday – October 18, 2015

You have to hand it to James and John, the sons of Zebedee. It's not for nothing that elsewhere in the gospel they were nicknamed "Sons of thunder." These guys had chutzpah! Imagine being gutsy enough to just come right out and say it: "I want glory. I want to be number one." Or, to put it in Facebook parlance, "I want to get more 'likes' than anyone else."

James and John have to be commended for their honesty. Because, let's face it, we want the same thing. We want to be noticed and publicly praised. We don't want to be invisible or taken for granted. It's a natural desire that's somehow built into us.

When I was growing up, my brother and I were constantly reminded not to get "the big head", or as my grandmother would put it, to "climb down from your high horse."

It's the way of Jesus to bring his disciples along with him, even if they don't seem to get it right away. No thundering denunciations here. Instead, he simply says, "I know that's what you want. So does everyone else. But it's not to be so among you." You are not called to "lord it over" others. You are called to serve and to humbly acknowledge every person's dignity. The number ones are not the powerful ones having their pictures taken at the head table; they are the quiet ones slipping in and out among the guests, refilling water and wine glasses, and laying down clean silverware for the next course.

We have all heard this topsy-turvy teaching of Jesus so many times it is all but lost on us. Such language about coming to serve, not to be served, is nonsense or incomprehensible in terms of the world in which we live. Jesus, of course, has other things on his mind. Has everyone been served? Is all the food on the table? Jesus is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne; he is a servant through and through. The good seats in the Kingdom are not his to give. Someone else is in charge of that, someone whom it is his sole pleasure and purpose to serve.

If we don't understand any of this, we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. James and John and the other first disciples took a long time to grasp fully what Jesus was truly about. But if we do understand, however dimly, it's because Jesus is still serving us, still feeding us, still giving himself away for us. That's the only example of power he will give us. Followers of Jesus are not meant to sit in the choice seats; rather, they stand in solidarity with the world's most famous servant, ready, with him, to serve rather than to be served.