

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2015

“Mighty in Humble Service”

Scripture: Mark 10: 32 – 45; 20 Pentecost B (Proper 24)

When it comes to getting the things we want, do we just sometimes lose our senses entirely? When it comes to satisfying our own needs, do we just stop listening or seeing or noticing what is going on around us?

I remember a beautiful and sunny day many years ago now ---it was Mother's Day, in fact--- and I was in the back yard of our home visiting with my wife and some friends, and I had wandered away from the conversation, both figuratively and literally, and I was not paying too much attention to the metal trapeze bar on our swing set that I was pushing, sending it swinging back and forth, back and forth with increasing force. And finally I grasped the bar and swung it much too hard, I guess just to see what it would do, and the chain came off on one end, and the bar swung up and over the swing set and down right on top of my head, CRACK! And I reeled backwards dizzily and stumbled down on one knee pressing my hand to my forehead, and I felt the warm blood start pouring through my fingers and down onto my face. And it was about that time I was relieved to see one of my young sons come crashing out the back door. “Ah, he saw what happened,” I thought. “He’s coming to check on me. I could use some help and sympathy at this moment.” And he ran over and

stopped in front of me, and he looked curiously at me and said, “My brother won’t let me change the TV channel, and there is a show I want to watch! ...Hey, what happened to you!?!” And without waiting for a response, off he ran back inside to fight it out over the TV while I wondered when I was going to pass out.

Did it even occur to my son that his TV show might not be the most important thing in that particular moment? Had he noticed my situation at all? Apparently not, because there was something he desperately wanted. And nothing else mattered. And my head injury wasn’t going to change that.

And did it even occur to James and John that this might not be the particular moment for them to ask Jesus a personal favour? *“Make us the best, Jesus,” they ask. “Make us the most important. Let us sit on either side of you, right there on your right hand and right there on your left, when you take over and become the king. That’s what we want you to do for us.”* Poor James and John; they still haven’t figured it out. The man they are following isn’t there to take power, claim the throne, dish out political favors, and run the world the way he wants to run it. Despite all the teaching he has already given to his followers about mercy, service, justice, peacemaking, humility, and love, they are still jostling for position in the administration, hoping their political ambitions can be met, looking for power and prestige, desiring to shape their worlds according to their desires. Did it even occur to them that Jesus just told them that he fully expects these

are his final days. At the end of this journey, all he has to look forward to is mocking and spitting and trials and floggings, and after all that, a terrible death. And *this* is the time James and John choose to sidle up next to their boss and ask for the first class seats, the important positions, the big shot jobs on either side of the chief big shot? What? Had they not been listening at all? What were they thinking? Were they thinking? Did they even realize that Jesus had just confided in them his deepest concerns of his approaching death, and they chose this as the time to start a major spat over who among Jesus' friends was the most important or who Jesus loved most?

Of course, James and John don't get their wish. And Jesus likely did them a great favour after all. He likely saved them from themselves, from their own hubris and insensitivity, and their own misconception of what it meant to be a follower Jesus. And he told them a better way to live... *"... 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."*

The old story is told of the mighty oak tree that lived in the meadow near the bank of a river. And the oak towered over his domain and looked down haughtily upon the smaller trees and shrubs and the insignificant grasses of the field. He was tall and he was strong, and could hardly remember a time when it was any other way, a time when he had forced his way out of the dark earth like every

other plant of the field,, when life was but a chance, when he hoped that he would even survive day by day. No, he was big, and he was mighty, and now he was master of the land.

So, on one particularly blustery and threatening day, when the wind blew and blew, the mighty oak was really unconcerned. After all, he was the tallest of all that surrounded him, the king of his domain, the strongest and mightiest of all. But the wind continued to blow; and it grew stronger and stronger into the night. And though the oak protested and stood firmly against the blast, dug in his roots, and defied the increasing strength of the wind, the gale eventually drew up his powerful and rigid frame, tore his roots from the ground, and toppled him to the earth with a loud and resounding crash.

In the morning, when the wind had fled and the stillness of the meadow by the river had returned, and the sun had crept over the horizon to bring the new day, the once mighty, but now spent and defeated, oak opened his eyes to see the reeds and grasses standing upright and firm all around his fallen body. They looked as though nothing had ever happened. And the oak sighed: "I wonder how you, who are so light and weak, so insignificant, are not entirely crushed by these strong winds." They replied, "Ah, you, once mighty oak, fight and contend with the wind; you stand proudly and rage against it, refusing to bend to its nature and purposes, refusing to humble yourself and bend as you might have need, for you know you are the greatest, and consequently you are brought down; while we, on the contrary, stand humbly in the face of daily life, and we bend before the least breath of air, and therefore remain unbroken to live another day."

It is not for us Christians to use our places, our positions of power, our resources and influences to secure only that which is good for us, that which assures our privilege in the world, or that which only comforts us. Jesus tells his followers that we are not to live that way, but are to define greatness through service to others, to define importance through caring for others. And we are to do so, because that is why he came in the first place: "...not to be served, but to serve." We need not fashion ourselves like the mighty oak in order to be noticed. Rather, like the humble grasses that cover the meadow, the churches might adorn the landscapes of our neighborhoods and our nation, providing beauty, sustenance, shelter, comfort, friendship, faithfulness, and care, all while turning and bending and moving to meet the needs not only of ourselves, but also of those who need us.