

## DOWNWARD MOBILITY

<sup>35</sup>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."  
<sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."  
<sup>38</sup>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?" <sup>39</sup>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;  
<sup>40</sup>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."  
<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."  
(Mark 10:35-45, NRSV)

What makes a person great? Muhammad Ali, when he was the heavyweight champion of the world, loved to audaciously boast, "I am the greatest." For a time that was true, he was the greatest boxer. But in time he lost the title and was replaced by another champion. Even champions

who retire on top, undefeated, age and lose their edge in time.

What makes a person great? Too often we emphasize the accumulation of money and the things money can buy. We emphasize power, prestige, and celebrity. All of us have ambitions for our children. A standard parental line for years in our country was that we wanted our children to have a better life than we did. The American dream beckoned and very often each succeeding generation made more money than the previous one. This is no longer a given.

A recent *USA Today* article reported that “between 2001 and 2004, median incomes fell for householders under 45, even as they rose for older ones. Income fell 8%, adjusted for inflation, for those under 35 and 9% for those aged 35 to 44. The numbers add new weight to longstanding concerns about whether younger generations of Americans will achieve living standards that are better — or at least equal to — those of their parents”.<sup>1</sup>

While all of wish the best for our children, perhaps we wish for the wrong things. Perhaps instead we should hope that our children will be downwardly mobile, not in an economic sense, but in terms of priorities. Downwardly mobile in the sense that they treat *all* people with kindness and love, most especially those who are down on their luck, those who are down and out. Downwardly mobile.

Even the best parents wish the wrong things for their children at times, usually without even realizing it. In today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark we find two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, who happen to be brothers, telling Jesus that they want to sit on his right and left when he reigns in glory. We find an almost identical story in the Gospel of Matthew except in his version it is

their mother, Salome, who asks Jesus to do this for her sons, James and John.

As is often the case when we're angling for power and prestige, we don't really know what we're asking for, what mess we might be getting ourselves into. In response to James and John's outlandish request Jesus responded, "You don't really know what you're asking! Are you able to drink from the cup that I must soon drink from or be baptized as I must be baptized?" In referring to the cup from which he must drink and the baptism with which he was to be baptized, Jesus referred to the suffering that awaited him on Good Friday.

Throughout scripture the word "cup" is sometimes used as a symbol of suffering. Thus drinking from the cup means to suffer.<sup>2</sup> Recall Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died when in anguish he prayed "God, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done."<sup>3</sup> Were the brothers willing to drink from the cup of suffering?

James and John insisted that they were ready, willing, and able to do whatever needed to be done. If asked to complete this story, most of us would probably picture Jesus telling the over zealous brothers that they had no idea just how bad things were going to get and that they did not have what it takes to endure such hardships. Then the story would end with the expected refrain, be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.

But this is not how the story goes. After James and John insist they are ready to face the worst of it Jesus agrees with them saying, "You certainly will drink from the cup from which I must drink. And you will be baptized just as I must." And they did. In the years following Christ's resurrection and ascension, James and John, like the rest of

the disciples, endured suffering and persecution for being faithful followers of Jesus. Does this mean that their request was granted to sit on Jesus' right and left? No. Jesus told them, "It isn't for me to say who will sit at my right or my left. That is for God to decide."

Enter the other disciples. The other ten overheard James and John's request and became angry. Maybe the other ten felt outraged that James and John were cozying up to Jesus, jockeying for positions of power in what they all incorrectly assumed would be Christ's earthly kingdom. Or the ten might have been angry that James and John beat them to the punch, for the other disciples felt the same burning desire for positions of power. I'm guessing the latter because Jesus responded in a way that put them all on notice that his spiritual kingdom had nothing to do with being upwardly mobile. On the contrary, Jesus told them that to be his true followers they must become downwardly mobile. He said, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."<sup>4</sup>

Just as Jesus tried to open his disciples' eyes to the truth in this story, he seeks to open our eyes as well. Being upwardly mobile in a financial, social, or political sense is not what matters to God. God wants us to be downwardly mobile, down on our knees praying, down on our knees taking care of needy children, down on our knees caring for the wounded as the Good Samaritan did, down on our knees washing each other's feet, serving one another as Jesus did. Jesus knew that it was better to be a servant than to have servants, that it was better to give than to get, that it was better to help than to hoard.

After all, this is just the way Jesus lived his life. It was not for Jesus to tell James and John where they would sit in the great heavenly banquet on the other side of eternity.

However, as Canadian minister Rev. Richard Fairchild put it, “I can tell you that Jesus himself sits at the right hand of God. He sits there because he gave himself to us wholly and completely, because he served God and served us all with all of his heart and soul and body. I can tell you that when he entered Jerusalem in triumph just a few days before his death, he rode [a donkey], not a stallion; and that he stayed in the humble home of a friend, not in some pretentious palace. I can tell you that he gave food to the hungry and that he visited the sick, and that when he performed miracles he fled from the crowds that wanted to make him a king because of the power that they knew lay behind those acts. I can tell you that Jesus didn’t just wash people’s souls clean of sin, he kneeled beside them and washed their feet clean of dust and dirt. And not once did he complain that no one appreciated him, nor did he open his mouth when he was reviled and persecuted because he was a friend of sinners. I offer you today a reminder of who is at the right hand of God and of some of the reasons for why he is there. I offer...this reminder in the name of God, so that when [we] speak to [our] children, and when [we] consider what is worthwhile and what is worthy of respect and what jobs are beneath [our] dignity, and what insults [we] cannot bear, [we] will know what is right...Our reward is indeed in heaven—whether to the right or to the left or to the front or to the rear of our Servant King I cannot say—but I can say that God will embrace us and wipe every tear from our eyes and that all we will find there will make the glory we sometimes seek here seem like so much trash. Praise be to God for...salvation...through Christ Jesus our Lord, our brother, our friend, and our servant.”<sup>5</sup> AMEN.

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and giving God, we thank you for your Son Jesus, who humbled himself and came to us as a servant, one of the least among us. O loving God, when we dream of power, let us dream of the power to help others as he helped others, and when we wake, help us to care as he cared. Pour forth your strength and your joy and your peace upon us, not that we might be exalted, but that we may be able to bear what would otherwise be a bitter burden and that we may be able to drink the cup that would otherwise overwhelm us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, our brother, our friend, and our servant. AMEN.

The first paragraph was adapted from <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-or29smsu.php>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/money/perfi/2006-02-27-income-young-workers\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/perfi/2006-02-27-income-young-workers_x.htm)

<sup>2</sup> *Contemporary English Version* of the Bible, footnote, p. 1041

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:43-44

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-or29smsu.php>