

"Defining Moments"

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First Presbyterian Church
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**Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 34:1-8
New Testament Lesson - Mark 10:35-45**

A CBS newscaster was roaming up and down the streets of Vatican City in Rome, Italy, just before the election of Pope John Paul II. Whenever he approached someone, he would pose the following question: "What would you like to do if you were the Pope?" When he came to a 14-year-old girl, she replied: "I'd cover the communion wafers with chocolate." Chocolate-covered communion wafers – that's what she dreamed of.

In today's New Testament Lesson, James and John have grander dreams for themselves. They ask Jesus to, quote, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." And Jesus says to them, "You do not know what you are asking." He says this because James and John are asking to have their faith sugar-coated just like a chocolate covered communion wafer. But instead of sugar sweetness, James and John are interested in the sweetness of power and greatness and glory. And Jesus teaches them – teaches us – that the power and greatness and glory that we do have as followers of Christ, it's not the same as the power and greatness and glory that the world offers. There's a different kind of sweetness to it- sometimes it's a little bittersweet. But in the end what Jesus offers us is more powerful and greater and more glorious than we can imagine.

So Jesus asks the two apostles, "are you able to drink or be baptized by the baptism that I am baptized with?" The cup that Jesus drinks is the cup of salvation, through the baptism of repentance and new life. This is what it is to be a Christian. And yet, how many of us feel powerful and aggrandized and glorified by the things we do as Christians – serving though the church and giving of ourselves for one another. Church work – true Christian living – is often a thankless and tiring calling. Just ask any of our Session members or Deacons, our Trustees or other Committee members, or our Sunday school teachers and others who volunteer here at church and out in the community. Just coming to worship on Sunday, or LOGOS on Wednesday evenings, or Circle during the week, or any of our fellowship events and Mission Outreach opportunities can sometimes seem like thankless and tiring activities. They don't always make us feel powerful or grand or glorified. And yet, in many ways, these faithful activities form the acts of our baptismal vows and uplift the cup of Christ's salvation, elevating us in untold and often unknowable ways.

We become the examples of others to follow or as the humble conveyors of divine blessings upon the lives of others. Whether this makes us more powerful, greater or glorious people, well, that's for God to reveal, in God's time. But it is our promise and our hope and our assurance that by living and dying in Christ we do share in Christ's glory.

Jesus says, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized." And whatever comes from that, we remain confident in Jesus' teaching when he says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Here, Jesus redefines the words "servant" and "slave." James and John and the other apostles had a very different understanding of what it is to be a servant or a slave. We think of servants as being ill-treated, as continually striving – if not conniving – to rise above their social status. Or for some people who feel like "servants" or "slaves," they seek to bring down others and thus make themselves feel powerful, great and even glorious.

And here comes Jesus shifting all this around, saying "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life, a ransom for many." This is a paradigm shift – a radical change in the meaning of these two words (servant and slave) that changes all of human society, changes us. Because, within Jesus' definition of servant and slave, there is unimaginable freedom. Did you ever expect that being a servant or slave could bring freedom? It's true, and what's more under Jesus' definition there is unexpected and often incomprehensible glory. Under Jesus' definition, what once brought abuse, material poverty, and spiritual degradation now brings the assurance of divine care and protection, spiritual-if-not-always-material wealth, and a life of undreamed of blessings.

But to receive these promises of our faith, we must embrace the paradigm shift. Paradigm shifts are available to us only at certain defining moments in our lives. For James and John, their encounter with Jesus was the defining moment in their lives. Having had the opportunity to study and follow Jesus' teachings, these two common men, who Jesus comes to called the Sons of Thunder, these two ordinary guys go on to be powerful, great, and glorious witnesses to the faith.

James was the first apostle martyred for the faith. He refused to turn away from Jesus and his teachings, even when facing the tip of King Herod Agrippa's sword (Acts 12:2). And as for John, he too suffered under the persecution of Herod Agrippa. But John did not lose his life for the Christian faith, at least not as the world thinks of losing one's life. John lived a long life and died of natural causes in Ephesus. And yet like James, John also gave his life to the faith.

He just didn't have to give up his life for the faith, except to live as a humble servant of the Lord, who was wholly captivated by his Christian walk. And as we see in the lives of James and John and the lives of countless Christians living as a humble servant of the Lord and being captivated by our faith, it isn't easy. Most of us spend our lives struggling to strike a balance between giving ourselves over to the care and protection and the hidden blessings of our faith and giving ourselves over to the ways of the world, which don't bring us true blessings; don't bring us everlasting care and protection.

Consider the man who found himself stuck in a crowded airport besieged by bad weather and flight cancelations. Hundreds of travelers were on standby. But because this man was a senior business executive desperate to get on the plane, he kept crowding the counter, trying to get the airline staff to move his name higher up the standby list. The agent had just put down the microphone, having said to the crowd for the third or fourth time: "Those of you who are on standby, please sit down and we will call your name when we have a seat for you." But this man had no faith in things working out for him. He kept pestering the agent, explaining how important it was that he get on the very next flight. Finally, in exasperation, he asked her, "Do you know who I am?" With this, the agent had had enough. Picking up the microphone, she announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a man here who does not know who he is. Would someone please claim him, offer him a seat, and tell him I'll get to him when it's his turn?"

This man acted like he was going to die if he didn't get on that plane right then. And of course, he wasn't. His life was not in danger – at least not physically. But spiritually, this was a defining moment for him.

We can relate to such defining moments in our lives, can't we? While most of us will never be asked to die for our convictions, we are asked to give our lives to Christ and our Christian faith. And in doing so, part of us does die away –our pride, or envy or self-centeredness or whatever; With God's help it dies away so that we can know what true living is all about, what it is to live a powerful, great, and glorious life in humble service to God and to one another.

To embrace such a calling in our lives we need to be on the look out for those defining moments. A defining moment is like when the college professor asked his student why she was always late turning in her papers. She confessed that she was working two jobs AND going to school. The professor knew she already had a full scholarship, so he asked why she was working so hard. "I'm buying a mink coat," she said. "A mink coat? Do you need a mink coat?" To which the student replied: "I want a mink coat, therefore I need a mink coat."

Funny, until you think about it; and think about the things we “want” that get in the way of what we really need in ourselves.

That was a defining moment for that student. We can only hope she will have others, and in those moments, choose better. Because what she needs more than a mink coat is a moral compass and a spiritual guide. And that’s what we all need.

One of the best places for us to find our moral compass and to receive spiritual guidance and enlightenment is in a community of faith. This church is full of servant leaders who know what it is to be “slave of all.” And they will tell you that the promises Jesus makes to those who faithfully respond to God’s calling do indeed bring a power and a greatness and a glory above all others. They know this because they have experienced the unequalled care and protection, the inner wealth and riches, and the ultimate rewards and blessings that come only from God. And I hope and suspect that we all have experienced those in our lives.

You may have been asked recently, or you may be asked in the days ahead, to serve in & through this community of faith – as a Session member, Deacon, Trustee or committee member; a Sunday school teacher, event planner, choir member, liturgist, usher or greeter.

The opportunities to serve Christ through this church are countless, because if you want to serve, just let me know; we’ll find a place where God can use you. And when you do, you might just be surprised to find that this a defining moment in your life.

In fact, I invite you to embrace this moment, right now, as a defining moment in your life. Take a moment now to think of a time when you were asked to serve and declined – I’ll do the same. Were you at peace with that decision to decline?

I can think of times when, yes, I was at peace with it – times when the call to serve was from something other than God – maybe ego, or fear, or overreaching, or pride. It’s OK not to answer those calls, or to hang up once you realize you’re on the look for something that’s not right for you. We’ve all had those times in life when the call was more of a misdeal than a divine calling. But, we can all also think of times when we were called to serve and the call was a divine calling. And when we pass up such a calling – no matter how hard it might be to fulfill or how uncertain we are that we’re suited for it – when we pass up God’s call upon our lives, it’s not the world that suffers. It’s us.

Jesus redefines the words “servant” and “slave”. And he does this for good reason. He does this because when we turn our lives over to God in service to Christ and to one another, we become the most elevated

servants and the freest slaves imaginable. Elevated to God's service and freed to give ourselves to Christ.

This is our calling. Let us all be on the look out for God's call in your lives- for that defining moment in your life- and decide for yourself right now how you will answer. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, you are worthy of all our praise and worship. Help us to discover that the more we give of ourselves to you, the more we have of ourselves to give to others. Make us servants in your name. Guide us as we're willing, and drive us when we're not. Shepherd us into the ways of sacrifice that are just and loving. Make us wide-eyed for beauty and for our neighbor's need; wide-willed for peacemaking and compassion; and wide-hearted for love, especially for those we find unlovable.

God of glory and honor, we are your servants, bowing before you as broken people. People with our own agendas. People who want life to be easy. We want the seat of honor and all the respect that comes with it, but we don't want the cup of responsibility.

Lord, you have children every day who go to bed hungry, alone, afraid, sick, or grieving. Help us serve their need as we listen for our call to be a servant to the least and the lost. And where our natural limitations stop us, enter into those situations, O Lord, with your unsearchable reservoir of peace, and comfort, and care.

For your power and greatness and glory are unlimited, and we seek to know it more and more as we come to know and to follow the One your sent, Jesus the Christ, whom we call Lord, and with whom we join our voices when we pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.