

October 20th message

A mom named Marge Flados tells how she was having difficulty raising her two sons, aged 10 and 4. They were typical kids always pushing the boundaries. She was about at the end of her rope one day when she confided to a friend how she thought 100% obedience from her sons would solve her problems and make her happier. One day at a family picnic with friends by a small lake her wish came true. There were small boats tied up on shore for anyone to use. She told her 4 year old not to go near the boats but he could play along the shore. After lunch while visiting with friends, much to her dismay she saw her two boys out on the lake in one of the boats. Without thinking she shouted to her youngest, "Joey get out of that boat!" Joey immediately jumped out of the boat into the water. Fortunately the water was only three feet deep in that area and his brother scooped up his scared, coughing, crying little brother back into the boat and brought him to shore. The big brother wasn't too happy about the whole deal when he got to shore and said in an exasperated voice, "I can't believe what he did!!" Joey however looked at her and tearfully said, "Mommy, you TOLD me to get out of the boat!" Indeed I had. I got what I had wished for. Total obedience!

In today's gospel James and John also got a lesson in be careful what you wish for. The passage from Mark that we read today comes right after the third time Jesus tells of how He will be condemned to death. The disciples have just had other learning experiences including one about humility with a child being placed in front of them and the lesson on who is the greatest. After that a rich young man walks away from Jesus unable give up his reliance on his possessions and get his priorities straight in this life.

Yet, James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, who gave up the family business want places of honor in the kingdom. This tells us something about these two that we may not have thought of before. Perhaps they were equating their devotion to Christ with a move up the corporate ladder. After all, the fishing business they had left involved the hiring of others. People were promoted based on their performance. They conveyed this thinking to what they were doing now.

I can only imagine what Jesus must have thought, 'after all I've taught you, you're asking this of me?' So Jesus being the great teacher that He was poses a question, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" To which of course they reply yes, without thinking of the full implications.

We may think of cup as only a drink, but at the time, the phrase, 'the cup' meant the life and experience. 'My cup overflows' from Psalm 23 speaks of this life experience. The term translated to our baptized originally meant to dip or be submerged. So Jesus is basically saying, "Can you go through what I am about to go through? Can you face being submerged in hatred, pain, and death, as I will be?"

John and James were probably thinking of earthly kingdoms and all that went along with that. As two of Jesus longtime followers, along with Peter, they had been witnesses to the transfiguration. Surely they were special in the eyes of Jesus. But they got it all wrong. They thought Jesus would establish a kingdom with honored places centered in palaces and thrones. So when Jesus asks His question, He is essentially asks, 'are you prepared to suffer like I am about to?' They answer, 'we are able,' without realizing the full effect of what they are saying. But we should remember they eventually do. James was put to death under King Herod Agrippa according to Acts 12:2. John was forced to live in exile shut off from the outside world.

Sometimes we can be like James and John. We can get turned around in our thinking and not realize how we are getting it wrong.

It has been said that life is a series of choices. Some are short term day by day and week by week. Some are long term like the house we live in, the jobs and careers we seek, the spouse we commit to and so on. Along with that comes if and how we choose to look to the Lord for direction in our lives. We can be dedicated to our faith at certain times in our lives, then challenges and commitments come along that can pull us away.

We can look at this in a different way. We all know the importance of family. Just about everyone I know places a high priority on family. But then life comes along and there is a mortgage and bills to pay, there is the extra work to that needs to be done, and pretty soon we find ourselves overscheduled. Sometime along the way we realize how quickly time passes and how fast the kids or grand kids grow up. Eventually one has to reevaluate how they spend their time and realize what their priorities and commitments are.

It's the same in our relationship with God. We may start out strong but may find ourselves with little or no time to follow the Lord's will for our lives. James and John had misplaced priorities at this stage of their discipleship and Jesus had to make sure they knew what they were getting into.

When Jesus tells James and John that they will be baptized into the suffering that Jesus was baptized into and will drink the cup that Jesus will drink, he's warning them of all the trouble that's ahead of them because they have committed themselves to being his followers.

It's the same for us too. True commitment to Jesus can and does bring us joy and peace. But it will also bring difficulty. It will set one apart from others. There will be times when one has to make a stand. There will be times when one cannot follow the crowd and approve of words or behaviors that go against the teachings of the Lord. And there will be times when we drink from the same cup of Jesus that we too, will suffer. It may not be a physical type of pain rather it will be times of trials that take some patience and understanding in putting up with situations or challenging people.

Now let's look at the next part of the reading and how the other disciples were not very happy with James and John. This was a serious situation. Jesus probably realized He needed to call them together immediately and make this a teaching moment. Jesus has to remind all of them of how power can corrupt. He teaches the kingdom of God is not like that. They and we live in a world where greatness is often measured by personal achievement. Sometimes it's a question of being in the right place at the right time.

But Jesus turns this all upside down. The kingdom of God is not governed by power or status, but rather by service and hospitality.

This was hard for those first disciples to understand and it can be just as hard for us. Jesus has set the bar for us. He became the ultimate servant by His death for our sins. Now sin and death no longer have the last word for us. Because of this, we are now able to share in His cup and baptism.

Often at a celebration of life, Romans 6: 3-4 is read. "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? There we have been buried with him by baptism in to death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life."

The final verse sums it up pretty well, "The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

You and I have known many of God's servants throughout our lives. All of us can name different folks who we admire for their commitment to the Lord. They have influenced our lives and we try to live up to their example. We may look at these lives and conclude, they answered Jesus question and replied, 'we are able.'

I will close with a story about a church who Michigan who understood this calling. You may remember hearing about the city of Flint, MI and the problem they have with lead water pipes. Well, the congregation decided to do what they could to help. It started with twenty-four-pack cases of water were stacked high inside the church building and its nearby storage facility. The congregation's marquee sign invited residents to pick up free water between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. weekdays. Church members Javaris Burks and James Greer, joined by fellow Christians, volunteer all day before going to their regular jobs. "I always want to hear, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant,'" said Burks, a team leader at a General Motors truck assembly plant. "We're in the middle of a community that can really use our help."

“We just want to make sure we’re reflecting Christ,” added Greer, a lineman for a cable company. “Because sometimes we are the only Bible that people see.”

To this point the North Central church has distributed between 150,000 and 200,000 bottles of water.

We too are able to share Christ’s cup, to share His baptism, and to share in being servant of others. May we, with God’s help and by His grace, serve Him this way. Amen.