

In today's gospel lesson, we are nearing the end of the story about Jesus and the disciples making their way to Jerusalem. And there is an interesting pattern to how Mark tells the story of this trip. It would probably be easier to see this if we were reading the whole gospel right through, instead of chopped up into pieces for each Sunday. So let me pull it out for us.

Three times Jesus has told his disciples that Jerusalem will bring a dreadful culmination to his earthly ministry. In fact, the verses immediately before today's lesson read, "he took the twelve aside and said, '...The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death...the Gentiles... will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'"

It is in precisely this context that James and John approached Jesus to ask for positions of power in his future administration. "And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'" Now there'schutzpah!

Lest you think that the two of them are uniquely tone deaf, we should note that throughout these chapters, the twelve have been oblivious to the pain of Jesus' impending suffering, and have squabbled with each other like children over who is the greatest of the group. When the rest of the disciples got angry with James and John for their pushy request, it's clear that the ten are mostly upset that those two got in line before they did.

Three times this amazing display of obtuseness has occurred. And as if to underline the meaning of the pattern, both before and after this trio of Stupid Disciple Tricks we read about Jesus healing someone who is blind. Is Mark saying that the

disciples are stumbling around in the dark? That certainly is the implication.

Both in words and in the pain of his own sacrifice, Jesus has been saying that the life of God's Kingdom is not a way to achieve power or glory or riches. To follow the way of Jesus is to be a humble servant, vulnerable to those who do have the power. This is one of those teachings that can sound better on Sunday morning than they do in what we often choose to call 'real life' during the rest of the week.

Consider our present turmoil. We face impending mid-term elections with both parties emphasizing the magnitude of what's at stake. One party says that if they can take the reins of the House of Representatives, it becomes possible to bring impeachment proceedings against a president of limited popularity. The other party promises that if they are able to maintain a hold on both branches of congress they will be able at last to repeal the Affordable Care Act. What I do not hear from either side is a discussion of the best way to be humble servants of the common good for all people.

Without meaning to inject into the discussion whatever are my own political leanings, I would contend that, for us normal human beings, the usual things at stake in our struggles are power, glory and control. We are in terrible bondage to this vision of life, and it is from this entrapment that Jesus longs to free us.

Now to the best of my knowledge no one here is running for public office this year. But in our own ways and places, we are all susceptible to the constant clamor of our culture to make ourselves admired and invulnerable, with a firm grip on the material possessions to which the world says we are entitled.

When I went to medical school fifty years ago, a number of friends warned that in becoming a physician I could lose my soul to the lure of wealth and power, of becoming a very important person. Patients would do what I prescribed and nurses would run to serve my needs.

In reality, of course, patients listen only intermittently, and nurses make it clear that they are not the hand-maidens of the medical lords. But especially in my early years of training, at a time when most students, supervisors and professors were men, I experienced from those above me on the ladder many demonstrations of the medical power system, known by a rather pungent description, (which I will clean up a bit to repeat): The sewage flows downhill.

But there was one time when I saw from my supervising intern something so different that I have never forgotten it or him.

Frank, and I were making rounds that morning at the rather derelict County Hospital, looking for our newly admitted patient. We found the woman in a four-patient room. She was lying there tangled in sheets, and had slid all the way to the bottom of the bed, curled into a fetal position and moaning loudly.

We couldn't even begin to examine her like that, and I expected my intern to either holler for an aide to help us or to give me, the lowly student, an abrupt command to fix this problem right now.

But what Frank did instead was to carefully climb up onto the bed. He was a somewhat short, slender Filipino man, and the beds at the County were the old-fashioned, high ones that didn't crank down very far. Standing on the floor, he couldn't really get enough leverage to re-arrange things.

So kneeling on the bed beside her, and quietly talking to her, he slowly pulled the soiled sheets free from her bent limbs, drawing up a clean blanket to cover her. Next, carefully putting one arm under her shoulders, he gently lifted her up toward the top of the bed, arranging the pillow under her head. He then got down again without jostling the woman.

I was amazed and shocked. There was no yelling, or demands, or salty language, just the quiet actions of a servant. Frank showed me how to truly be a physician, and how to live in the model Jesus gave us for being in relationship with each other. We are to be servants, kneeling beside those who suffer in order to connect with their pain and need, whether we can repair their problems or not. Jesus has freed us for the possibility of this life of service.

Our choice is expressed well in an old Bob Dylan song:

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Whom will we serve? The world, in fact the whole cosmos waits on tiptoes to see our choice. May we keep our eyes on the Kingdom path, the road of service that takes us all the way home.