

## **ELBOW ROOM**

**JOB 38:1-7 (34-41); MARK 10: 35-45**

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There are two things defining themes here today. First, as Doug Kirkpatrick so poignantly reminded us, we are in the midst of a very important stewardship season. And secondly, we have the wonderful gift of being able to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism for two precious infant girls of this church family.

Our scripture readings come, as they do most Sundays, from the lectionary. The weekly, pre-selected readings from the Old and New Testaments that over three years lead us on a guided tour of the entire Bible. This discipline takes us into parts of the Bible that might otherwise remain unexplored territory.

If preaching is a conversation about the life of a church and its times I would like to reflect with you about what Mark is saying to us at this particular time in our journey. I want to talk today about leadership and giving with our stewardship season and baptisms as a backdrop.

One of the elder statesmen of our denomination, Robert Wood Lynn, who served as Vice President of the Lilly Foundation in charge of grants to theological education, Bob Lynn makes the distinction when we talk about giving between what he calls “the contribution,” “the commitment gift,” and “the core gift.”

By core gift Bob Lynn means a gift that expresses who the individual is and what he or she lives for. In other words, core givers are people whose giving defines who they are. Core givers give from the core of their lives, not the margins. Core givers define who they are in their giving.

It is safe to conclude that the commitment gift and the contribution – are lesser gifts in Lynn’s hierarchy. Gifts that stop short of defining the giver’s life and purpose.

There are few things as important for us to do as a church as reflect upon and deepen our understanding of what it means to give. We live in a society of consumption and acquisition – a culture that can be spiritually toxic to the soul.

We stopped in Freeport, Maine last week on our way to a wilderness weekend with our son at his school. Our destination was L.L.Bean. A beautiful, open, well-lighted store that houses a waterfall and trout pond. We needed new sleeping bags. We needed new flashlights. We needed, no wanted, too many things.

The reason this is toxic is because our culture wants us to define ourselves by what we own. But Jesus wants us to define ourselves by what we give.

And yet Americans are among the most generous people in the community of nations. Bob Wuthnow at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton documents giving trends among Americans. By far the largest category of gifts is made to religious causes.

So when it comes to talking about giving most of us discover an internal struggle. The impulse to give, the impulse to acquire. What is the right balance for me? Where do I draw the line in either case? What does Jesus say about all of this?

Turn with me to the gospel of Mark. You might not think about today's conversation between Jesus and James and John as a stewardship text. But reflecting on Bob Lynn's observation about core givers I think it is. This story gets to the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. It is a story about leadership and giving.

Jesus has just told his followers, for the third time, that he will suffer and die once they reach Jerusalem. On two previous occasions when he tells them this they don't get it. Their faces are blank after Jesus tells them that not only will he suffer and die but anyone who would follow him must do the same.

The fact that James and John elbow their way in before the other disciples to ask Jesus for the reserved seats at his left and right after the unpleasant business of his suffering and dying is over reveals that they get half the message: he is not going to be around much longer. What they miss is the other half of the message: how Jesus wants them to conduct their lives.

When the other disciples realize what James and John are up to they get angry. Not the righteous indignation a parent might have for a child who has violated a family principle, but the kind of anger that realizes it has been outfoxed and may miss out on the spoils.

So Jesus, maintaining his calm uses the dispute as a teaching moment: do not be like the gentiles, he says, who seek to dominate one another. This is not the leadership or greatness God calls us to. Rather, anyone who would be great must be servant of all, whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

You see, Jesus is talking about the core principles and behaviors that define those who follow him. Not until they undergo that dark night of watching his arrest and crucifixion do those disciples get it. Until then their goal is power and privilege – a lethal cocktail that prevents their growth and ensures their despair.

My hunch is most of us are perhaps more like those disciples than we might admit. We are driven often by selfish motives but we also hunger and are capable of profoundly unselfish acts.

I recently heard a pastor tell the story of Mamie Kay – a member of a church he once served in Texas. Mamie a homely, single woman who could be found in her pew in church every Sunday and who served for over thirty years as assistant to the Sunday School Superintendent.

Mamie was what they call in Texas "dirt poor." But she gave generously to the church. Then one year her pledge was so large that the Stewardship Committee asked the pastor to please go to Mamie and tell her to reduce her pledge. The next day the pastor visited Mamie and shared the concern of the Stewardship Committee. To which Mamie responded by asking the pastor, "would they deprive me of my joy?" When he reported his conversation back to the committee, he said, to a one they re-evaluated their own giving and in several cases increased their own pledges.

What is the right balance for us between acquisition and giving? Where do we draw the line? I believe that deep down each one of us wants to be a core giver like Jesus and like Mamie. But it doesn't just happen over night. Nor does it happen without sacrifice.

Whoever would be great among you must sacrifice. . . . I heard one of those wonderfully taciturn New Englander stories not long ago. Seems that Burt and Henry were friends. Burt comes by one day all excited. Tells Henry that he had just been into Boston, Faneuil Hall. Heard a lecture on socialism, he says. It's a wonderful vision, says Burt, everybody shares what they have with their neighbor. Nobody goes without what they need.

So, says Henry, if you have two automobiles socialism means you'd give me one? That's right Henry, if I had two automobiles I'd give you one. And if you had two farms, Henry asks Burt, you'd give me one? Yes, Henry, socialism says if I had two farms, I'd give you one. Henry pauses then looks Burt in the eye and says, you mean, Burt, socialism says if you had two hogs you'd give me one? Damn you Henry, Burt says, you know I have two hogs!

Hearing a visionary lecture on giving won't mean that you and I will suddenly become core givers. The kind of givers Jesus calls us to become. Lectures or sermons can help, nudge, and challenge. But becoming a core giver requires sacrifice, requires being last of all and slave of all. Jesus' disciples after Easter finally realized what he had sacrificed for them. They experienced a reversal of their old values. They underwent deep change. They became new leaders, servant-leaders defined by their giving.

This is the vision of leadership and giving Mark offers us today. Someone once said that a vision is not a true vision if it does not make us uncomfortable, if it does not judge or intrude upon us.

Mark's vision for leadership and giving surely makes us uncomfortable and in so doing may point to the attitudes where you and I need some intentional intrusion.

But the flip side of Mark's vision is deep joy.

One of the great servant leaders of our church – Jack Stotts – tells the story about his senior year of seminary over fifty years ago. Turns out that he needed \$250.00 to attend his final year at McCormick Theological Seminary. Not a large sum today, but then simply unattainable for him.

It also turns out that the president of the seminary, Dr. James Laurie, one time pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Buffalo instituted some policies at the school that Jack Stotts, with several of his classmates, was opposed to. They did not see eye to eye with the president or even like him very much he says.

As Stotts tells the story, he was walking down the sidewalk in Chicago one day when President Laurie drove up and asked if they could visit. The president got out of the car and came to Jack, opened the back door and introduced him to Mrs. Wharton who remained seated. Mrs. Wharton, said the president, wanted to give Jack the money he needed to finish school. "I met her for five minutes," Stotts said. "The first and last time I saw her in my life. But she is as present to me as members of my family. She made the difference in the course of my life at that critical moment. Stotts has established a scholarship fund at McCormick in Mrs. Wharton's memory. Each year he gives to it. "My desire to give back," says Stotts, "is a well too deep. It cannot be filled." Giving that comes from the core of your being defines who you are and fulfills God's purpose for your life.

What Mark tells us today is not only is it possible to be a core giver – this is precisely what God made us to be.

God made us to fulfill our life's purpose by giving with abandon not caution and timidity. Nothing satisfies our hearts as deeply as giving like Jesus – even if it means suffering like him.

Giving that comes from the core of our being. Until we discover and trust that level of giving away our lives we dwell at the margins of life.

Just a few moments ago we baptized Ava and Brooke Horn. Did you notice Jesus' question to the disciples? Can you drink the cup that I drink? Can you be baptized with the same baptism with which I am baptized?

The sacraments of our faith, the sacrament of baptism by which we welcome these two little ones today into the church of Jesus Christ is a baptism of suffering – make no mistake.

But it is also a baptism of deep joy and new life.

The question for you and me today is not only what would it look like if we were an entire congregation of core-givers but what would it mean for our community.

I suspect that most of us are pretty good at that old game James and John engaged in: elbowing our way to the top of whatever the pile may be.

What Jesus calls us to do today is to give our time and talent and treasure in ways that make clear that we are his followers....

Ways that allows others, pushed aside by life, elbow room at the table of opportunity and hope. Amen.