

Sermon: Pentecost 21

Mr. Evans DeVries

October 18, 2015

Year B

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

Weasels!

When I hear or read today's gospel, that's what my first reaction usually is. At least part of my gut comes down squarely with the 10. What a pair of weasels! My feelings about this account is bad, but it is mild compared to my feelings toward Matthew's version. In Matthew 20:20 the Zebedee boys get their mother to do the asking! I mean, come on! Isn't this bad enough when they do it without hiding behind momma's skirts? Well, actually, they all wore skirts back then, but you get my point. OK, maybe this was the teachable moment about servant leaders and maybe I missed something redeeming in these guys, so I set out to be charitable and cut these guys some slack. After all, Jesus called them right after Peter and Andrew and he said "Follow me" to them. He didn't do that often. Besides, Jesus knows their hearts, so it is unlikely that he'd choose a pair of weasels to be among his closest followers. I must have missed something in all this. Maybe there is a logical explanation in human behavior that explains them asking this "favor".

I started with the fact that when we are in strange situations, we tend to act in a manner that is most appropriate with the next closest thing in our experience. This applies to both simple and complex behavior. In psychology, that's called generalization. If you are my age or older, you might actually remember the first time that you saw television. If you are younger, television was everywhere within only a couple of years, and you might have been put down in front of a set before you had any inkling of what it was. In my case, the York family, neighbors of my then best friend, invited many kids from the neighborhood in one afternoon, at about 4:30. We were shown into a darkened living room which had been stripped of easy chairs, sofa, and tables. These items had been replaced by the dining room's straight chairs and those of several neighbors. All the

chairs were arranged in nice neat rows, facing this wooden cabinet with a dark round screen. At 4:45, a “Test Pattern” appeared on the screen which we stared at intently for 15 minutes. At 5:00, a program came on. I vaguely remember it as a production of the local station which eventually became WOTV. This new thing was like having live movies in the house, and so we acted as we did at the movies. Now, this kingdom thing of Jesus’s was a new thing for James and John, but they did know about the kingdoms of their day, and possibly they were trying to transfer over the old behavior to a new situation. This is not, however, a particularly persuasive argument. We can’t find a lot of slack for James and John, here.

Continuing to be charitable, I thought that perhaps they weren’t grasping the seriousness of the situation, even though Jesus had, immediately before this described, for the third time, what was about to happen to him. Dr. D. Mark Davis of Heartland Presbyterian Church in Iowa suggests that out of ignorance of the situation which was unfolding and lacking an understanding of the coming kingdom, what they did was akin to “calling shotgun” to occupy the front passenger seat on the trip. In my search for redemption, I even considered a desire to protect Jesus as much and for as long as possible. This, much like Thomas, the twin, rousing the others to return to the house of Lazarus after Lazarus had died. In John 11 Thomas says, “Lets us also go that we may die with him.” Part of the message, the news of Christ’s impending death, might have actually sunk in with the Zebedee brothers.

The problem with being charitable with these weasels is that none of this aligns with what happens after the 10 get wind of what had been going on. They may still have been clinging to the notion of works righteousness, I don’t know, but they are angry. When they complain, Jesus explains, one more time, that the rules for the new Kingdom are, literally 180 degrees opposite from the world’s. In the Kingdom of God, the first will really be last and the last will REALLY, REALLY be first. If you would be first, move DOWN. Mark Davis, whom I cited earlier, and other commentators refer to this as “downward mobility”. From all this I concluded that the weasels may not have meant to

be weasels, and they were probably sincere. Misguided, but sincere. As usual, Jesus is patient, teaching and guiding up to the end.

After the sons of Zebedee made their request, Jesus asked them if they could drink the cup that he was going to drink. They answered almost without thinking that they could. Scott Hozee from Calvin Theological Seminary's institute for Excellence in Preaching, personalizes this by noting that we are asked the same question, whether or not we realize it, and fears that most of us don't really think much before we answer. He says that every time we take part in the eucharist, "the same cup of suffering and humility stands right before our eyes". As we partake of the eucharist, by drinking from the cup, "we perform a sign that we believe in Jesus. We believe in his program. We believe in his self-proclaimed path to spiritual greatness." So, each week I am asked, as James and John were, "Can you drink from the cup that I will drink?" If I do drink, but walk out of here and continue to seek worldly power, influence or prestige; ANYTHING but the opportunity to serve others, it leaves only one question: Who's the weasel, now?