

We hear a great deal today about upward mobility. It seems to be the desired goal of all those who are not at the very peak of society's image of success. People speak of glass ceilings which interfere with their continuing up the path to success. People speak of what needs to be done to give those who are oppressed access to that upward movement. Our focus as a culture is on moving upward no matter our current station in life if there is something we perceive as being better or greater. As a culture we tend to prize being at the top. Knowing that about ourselves, do we ever identify with James and John's request in this passage? Do we ever sympathize with their desire to be recognized and rewarded? We often just focus on how dense they must have been to have failed to get the message Jesus is repeatedly giving them about the way the messiah will provide redemption. He is telling them that their expectations are wrong. His message is not about getting but giving. And that message includes them. When Jesus' ministry began, they left their father in his boat mending the nets in order to go with Jesus around the Galilean countryside. They have been with him and seen wondrous things. Today's reading begins when they approach Jesus with a request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Perhaps it is not too great a leap to understand them. They have seen him provide healing and nourishment to others. Now in the face of uncertainty they want to receive something in exchange for signing on to this journey Jesus is making. They want to collect on their discipleship. The request they initially make is very broad and inclusive—they want Jesus to do whatever they ask. They seem to have their minds on that upward mobility track. In response to Jesus' return question is for them to define just exactly what it is they want. They are seeking positions of recognition and power. They request to sit beside Jesus, one on the right and the other on the left. When we look at the context of their request—we have to really wonder what they are thinking. Between the passage we considered last week when the young man departed grieving because he could not give up his possession and this passage, we read about the third time that Jesus tells the disciples what being God's Messiah will cost him. The description is explicit about the treatment Jesus will receive in Jerusalem; being spit on, mocked and flogged before dying. It is significant that this is the third time they have been given the announcement of what is looming on the horizon. From the perspective of telling the story, this information should only need to have been given once. But the threefold nature of the pronouncement is a way of asserting the reliability and inevitability of what is to come. These pronouncements are also made more vivid by the stark contrast to what precedes or follows them. The first time Jesus tells them what going to Jerusalem means, it is a redefinition of what it means to be the messiah. It is so far from what Peter was expecting that he rebukes Jesus for even saying it. Peter imagines Israel's redemption will come through strength, not by apparent weakness and dying on a cross. The second time Jesus discloses his mission and destiny the disciples begin that debate as they are walking back to Capernaum. They discuss among themselves who will be the greatest. Jesus' response is to scold them telling them that being last is the mark of the one who will be first among his disciples. He then embraces a child explaining greatness comes from receiving and welcoming the vulnerable who are not valued by society. The request by James and John which follows here indicates they not only still didn't understand his words, but also misunderstood his mission, his character and what discipleship will require. In this case James and John have drawn Jesus away from the others to seek an advantage for themselves. Jesus understands that they haven't understood the meaning behind truth of the suffering that will come. Jesus tells them "you do not know

what you are asking". It seems that might be an example which illustrates the expression: "be careful what you ask for". Jesus talks of the cup he will drink and the baptism he will have, referring to his coming suffering and death. They profess that they will indeed be able to "drink of the cup" which Jesus will drink and be baptized as Jesus will be. Jesus agrees that they will indeed drink the cup of suffering but he also tells them that will not guarantee them the positions of power they seek. Near the end of this passage we find that the other disciples are not happy with James and John when they learn of their request. This disagreement causes Jesus to gather them all together and again give the message that discipleship in his reign is about giving, not getting. "So Jesus called to them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.' " The reference to Gentiles allows us to place this comparison in the past. But that observation doesn't sound like it just applies to ancient times; in fact it sounds fairly contemporary. In Jesus' context it was the aristocratic land barons or the Roman overlords who made the rules, and of course the rules they made were to benefit themselves. These days it seems that we have corporate barons and their political cronies who are guilty of making rules which are blatantly in their self-interest. That seems to be the way of the world no matter what terms name the rich and the powerful. But Jesus tells his disciples that there is another way. And that different way is to be the one he will follow, and that it will become their way: "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." This is at the core of what Jesus' messiah-ship was about. It is a way of living that runs contrary to our natural tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life according to the terms of the world. In this text James and John think that greatness comes from status and power. We live in a world that agrees with that view. But Jesus proposes that we find greatness in our willingness to serve others—to give of ourselves. Earlier we talked about God's intention from the beginning that we are to be in relationship with God and with each other. This view of giving up the desire to place ourselves above others and to instead serve each other is about how to have a healthy community life. When we buy into the world's view we become dissatisfied with what we have. We begin to believe that the only way to be happy is to get a bigger share of a pie which is in limited supply. This becomes a recipe for hostility and frustration and anger toward others. If instead we concentrate on relationships with those around us; if we see ourselves as linked and interconnected to other people, if we view the world as having the possibility for abundance for all, can we then be better disciples of Christ. What if we try to rediscover as a society the "downward mobility" that Jesus is talking about? There have been people and times in our history that have lived that way. There were and are people who made sacrifices of time and talent for others. There was a time when it was widely thought that if you were given much, then much was expected from you. It was not thought that was just to be a means of gaining more. Jesus calls us to that way of downward mobility; a way that seeks not to take but to give; that seeks not to be served but to serve. It's a way of life that leads to life. It's a way of life that brings the reign of God near to us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.