



Children's Sabbath

Who Wants to be First?

Mark 10:35-45

Today we celebrate Children's Sabbath in the life of the church, and though it's not a major church event like Christmas, Easter, or even All Saints' Day, from my perspective, it is quite important to the church because it is a time for us to focus on what children mean to Christ's church, what the church means to them, and what all of our roles are in all of that. And without trying to be too abstract or metaphysical, how we respond to all those questions depends on how we respond to Jesus' statement in verse 44 today. And just how do we respond? What does it mean for us to be first by being slave of all?

Well, that's a tough question, to be sure. But I think it's probably become the kind of question that we've grown accustomed to hearing in church services and in bible studies. The kind of God-talk that's become cliché in Christendom. It's tired, and we don't have much push to actually apply it to our lives. But it's really the perfect question for today because we celebrate the children's sabbath and in the 2nd service, we celebrate a baptism. And what are those things about?

Well, it's tempting to say that children and young people are the future of the church. It's tempting because it's logical. I mean, God willing, my children and all the children here will be making contributions to the church long after the Lord calls me home. But at the same time, our young ones, even baby Elizabeth who's being baptized today, are the present, the current, the now of the church, just like the rest of us. And just like the rest of us, they are in communion with the Savior who came not to be served but to serve and who gave his life as a ransom for all.

That's an important concept to come to grips with as we attempt to come to grips with what it means to be one of God's children. Now, the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8, "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." John Wesley referred to that verse as a "momentous truth," in his words. Because for Wesley, on a very personal level, what it meant was "that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given Himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God."

And it is through Jesus' serving rather than being served that any of us are reconciled to God. Importantly Jesus tells us that is why he came. That suggests that the entire life of Jesus is an exercise in service. He doesn't say that he learned to serve, grew to serve, came to a realization that he had to serve, or something along those lines. No, what the incarnation means is that the one who is the "firstborn of all creation," as Paul puts it in Colossians 1:15, came to earth to serve all. Just think about that for a moment. And at this Christmas season, when you see a nativity scene or conjure images of the baby Jesus, think of him as your slave and tell me you don't get just a little disturbed.

But then again, I think the incarnation is more disturbing than we typically recognize because it challenges the way we order things in our lives. Often times, folks will ask me whether I'm conservative or liberal or what. Honestly, I don't have any idea because all of that is relative, really. If you're fairly conservative, I probably appear liberal; if you're fairly liberal, I probably appear conservative. But I've come to absolutely despise those kind of labels, anyways. In fact, I was speaking with a good friend a few weeks back and toward the end of our conversation he complimented me on how much of a centrist I was. To be polite, I thanked him and said something like "thanks for noticing," but when I hung up, in more or less words, I said to myself, "Who the heck told him I'm a centrist?"

But what I do know is this: God has political goals in mind, but they're probably not the ones we seek after, myself especially included. After all, in Christ, he has given us a perfect example of what it means to be first by being slave of all. And I also know this: God didn't become human in the person of Jesus Christ, live a human life, die a terrible human death, and resurrect from the dead to have a small impact on a few lives or merely create some new social club. And he didn't take away our sin to give us a religion that can be put on a shelf with the other interests and pursuits we have in life. He did all that

to redeem the world and transform us from a fallen creation into a restored relationship with him. And why did he do all that? Because, in human terms, he loves us more than he loves himself. Again, I challenge you to think about that and try not to let it shake you up.

Over the past two weeks, our epistle readings have contained some of the most instructive lines of the New Testament because through them we've learned about the kind of high priest we have in Jesus Christ. He is a high priest who learned obedience from what he suffered and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, a high priest whose status comes entirely from God's divine initiative and not through worldly achievement. And it's that divine initiative that, as Hebrews 4:16 instructs, emboldens us to approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. And really, when you get right down to it, that leaves us in a position where the best we can do is respond with obedience and thanks to the One who perfectly became first by being slave to all.

Now, if Jesus came for the purpose of serving, and that's an identifying characteristic of his entire human life, then children's sabbath is as good an occasion as any to consider today's gospel passage. And that's because it's an occasion on which to consider just what children mean to Christ's church and just how they're a part of the divine plan for the first to be slave to all. Well, time and again, I've been reminded through my work here with children just why Jesus told the disciples to let the little children come to him. For example, this past summer during our VBS, a five-day period that stretched just about every single emotion I have (and a few I didn't know I had), I saw how God works on the hearts and minds of our young ones. There was one boy in particular who stands out because he lives out in Archer. And after he had been with us throughout the week, his dad explained to him that because of the travel distance involved and because of the family's schedule, he would not be able to come in for the final day of VBS. Well, kids have a way of being most persuasive about the things they care most about and somehow he convinced his dad to bring him in for our final day. Talk about religion of the heart.

But I had an even simpler and more basic example of that this week after our Wednesday night program here. I had an encounter that reminded me of what God is really all about. And to understand why I found it so powerful and such a testimony to God's presence in our lives and through his people, you have to understand that I had one of those weeks. The competing demands of my work here at the church, my teaching assignment in Tampa, my schoolwork in Orlando combined with my efforts to be a reasonably good husband and father left me physically, mentally, and emotionally fatigued by midweek. And on my way out Wednesday evening I crossed paths with David and Addie Watson. And young Addie, just being

Addie, came over to me and said, "Hello, 'Mr. Fronk,'" as she calls me, gave me a hug, and went on her way. Well, if that wasn't the work of the Holy Spirit, I know nothing about the triune God. As I left Wednesday all I could think was, "God loves his children. And thank God I'm one of them."

Speaking of God's children, today we are blessed with the baptism of one of them and whether we know it or not, Elizabeth's baptism will help us live out what Jesus promises in verse 39 from today's gospel. Or, really more accurately, through Elizabeth's baptism, God will live out Jesus promise through us, his church. Jesus tells the disciples that they will drink from his cup and be baptized with his baptism. He's bringing them into the fold, whether they know what that involves or not. And by God's grace, Elizabeth's baptism today shows us that God has kept the promise and that he continues to work his will through us and by doing so, continues to bring more of us into the fold. After all, God's greatest desire is to transform our fallen world into the good creation he originally intended. And, as perplexing as it seems, he's chosen to do that through the very human agents who have done such a good job of mucking things up over the years. Maybe I'm not talking about you right now, but I sure am talking about me. But think about it. God works through us as human agents, human agents who are in community with one another and who are commissioned to ever expand that community. And every time we welcome a new face in our midst, teach children about Jesus, or baptize little babies, I think we faithfully take a step in that direction -- a direction we must always pursue.

But at the same time, today's passage has a tough angle to it. Not only does Jesus use language that suggests submissive servitude, in his reference to the cup and his baptism, he's making a reference to things to come, most notably his suffering and death. As the exegesis of Richard Donovan points out, in the Old Testament, "cup" can refer to blessings, judgment, or death. In terms of today's passage, for Jesus and the disciple the cup will soon come to represent "the blood of the covenant which is shed for many" (14:24). And to borrow from William Barclay's interpretation, when Jesus says, "The cup that I drink you will drink" (v. 39), he seems to be saying, "Can you bear to go through the terrible experience which I have to go through? Can you face being submerged in hatred and pain and death, as I have to be?" And there's a great irony here. James and John ask Jesus that one of them may sit at his right and the other at his left. Those seem to be positions of honor, esteem, and prestige. Who wouldn't want to be there?

Well, there did come a time when Jesus had someone at his right and someone at his left. But it wasn't James and it wasn't John and it wasn't at the seat of glory they had in mind. No, instead it was one common thief and another on the cross of Calvary. The ultimate and perfect

example of suffering and self-sacrifice.

And so we come back to this challenging and disturbing call to be first by being slave to all. And we come back to our celebration of the children's sabbath. Here's how I think the two come together: We don't put our hope for the future in children or newly baptized babies, even though the future depends significantly on them. Rather, our young ones show us why we have hope in the future at all because they are evidence, I believe, evidence of the living God who casts a wide net on the basis of unconditional and unmerited love. And that love is God's, and God's love alone is what justifies us, saves us, and redeems us. That's why he gives us so much: the Scriptures, the church, and Jesus Christ, his only begotten child.

Maybe we don't have quite the mental capacity or quite the transformed heart to completely understand what it means for our lives together as Christians to affirm that God took on human form to be slave to all so that we would no longer be slave to sin. But here's something we can take away: what gives us the ability to be first at all is the example of Christ and that example gives us the ability to serve in the radical way that he commanded.

And it's the example of the cross that brings that home most forcefully. And so while it is tempting to view this passage in a negative light, it might be more positive than we think, more uplifting than we realize. Perhaps we should think of the cross as setting us free to serve like Christ and, thereby, to serve Christ. Now that sounds like something I want to do, even if the road gets a bit rough, which it will. It might be a rough road, but it's a road paved by the hope of Christ. And it's that hope that pushes us forward as Christian servants because it works on us heart and soul. To turn to John Wesley again, that hope, the hope that comes through knowledge of Christ, leads us to know that God "so works upon the soul by a strong, though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, that all his iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered." If that's what this is all about, if that's what comes by being slave to all, if that's what God promises each and every one of his children, then, please, dear Lord, let me be first. Amen.