

Sermon for Sunday, October 18, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Everybody wants to be first. It's just one of those things that seems to go along with being human.

It begins when we're little tiny kids. You know, when kids, barely able to talk, push their way forward, saying "Me, me!"

Then at school, that terrible feeling as they choose teams, waiting to see if you will be one of the first . . . or the one at the ends, where they say, "Well, I guess I'll take her."

And the pride with which we reel off our children's SAT scores, and let everyone know the prestigious colleges they've been accepted at.

And the never-ending dream of a bigger house or a nicer car.

We like to be first.

And the disciples were no different. Twelve of them, all with the chance of being closest to Jesus, twelve of them all hoping to be the ones chosen to be at the very front of this new movement that was to become the Christian church.

Twelve of them...

And here come James and John, jostling for top position. Please, they say to Jesus, please when you come into your kingdom, can we have the seats right beside you? Can we be first?

It's one of those times in the gospels when you can imagine Jesus being ready to back up and get back to heaven. Don't they get it? Has everything he has done, everything he has taught them, just gone in one ear and out the other, not bothering to stop at the brain on the way? What idiots!

Thankfully, Jesus is a little more gentle with them than I might have been. Instead of berating them for their stupidity, he asks them a question, a question that I imagine made them pretty keen

to withdraw their request.

Well, he says, you know
what you're asking. Can you really drink the cup I drink, or be baptized
with the baptism I'll receive?

Oh yes, they say, oh yes. We can do that!

But what they don't know, but we know with the benefit of hindsight,
is that the cup
is the cup of suffering, the cup that Jesus prays will be taken from him
the night before he dies,
and the baptism
was the baptism of death.

They want to be first,
but being first with Jesus
is being first in the firing line, first in front of the death squad.

It's not quite the sort of being first
that James and John
had imagined.

And they probably went away
pretty much discouraged.

But then the rest of the disciples heard about it. And they
were not
happy.
"Who are you to think you would be first?"
they whined at James and John.
Because of course,
all of them
had it in their heads
that they might be the ones Jesus would choose to head things up
when he took control.

Jesus heard their whining.
"You know," he said,
the people around us, they have a system

where the ones on the top
rule over everyone else, and make sure everyone else
knows exactly who is in charge, exactly
what place they belong in.
But it is not to be so with us.
Whoever wants to become great
must be a servant,
and whoever wants to be first
must be the slave of all.”

In other words, the way to become first
is not to climb on other people’s backs,
but to brace yourself
so they can climb on you.
Or, as Jesus said another time,
to love one another,
as he himself loves us.
He loves us so much
that he gave up his life for our sake.

Being first in the kingdom of God, means being last,
leading
means serving.

That’s the difference
that following Jesus makes.
It’s not just about the words we say
or the things we believe.
it’s about how we live our lives
each and every day.

A few years ago
the Episcopal Church had a publicity campaign
that said “We’re here for you”.
It wasn’t the most popular campaign we’ve ever done.
Some people said it was a bit corny.
Others thought it made us sound like a car dealership.
But underneath all that
was a much more significant problem.
Because what it implied

was that the purpose of the church
is to fulfil each individual's
needs and desires.
To give each person
what they want.

When it's the exact opposite.
Following Jesus
means letting go of your own desires
for the sake of the gospel,
about putting other people first,
about always asking
what can I do for others
and for God?

It means
singing the hymns you don't particularly like
because they help others
to worship God.

It means offering to teach Godly Play,
so that our children can grow in their faith,
even when you'd rather
spend your limited energy with adults.

It means
serving on vestry
when you'd rather spend the time
at home.

It means
reaching out to people who are alone at coffee hour
rather than just talking with your friends.

It means choosing to give generously
to the work of God
even if that means
a few less cups of coffee
or a missed meal out,
or an extra couple of years
before you get a new car.

Imagine what that would be like!
No more begging for people to do things.

No more feelings of scarcity.
Instead
an abundance of service
and an abundance
of love.

That's what stewardship is all about,
using the many gifts God has given us,
gifts of time,
gifts of our skills,
gifts of our money,
for the sake of one another
and for God.

Because that's what is it that makes us
who we are
as Christians.

People who strive not to be first, or to be served, but to serve.
Following our Savior,
Christ,
our way, our truth, our life,
the one we follow in thought and word and deed,
who came among us not to be served, but to serve,
and gave up his life
for our sake.

One again, as we're doing all of our Fall stewardship month,
I'm going to ask you to find on or two other people who you're not related to
and talk with them. And the question for today is
What is one thing you could do here at church
where you would give up your own interests
to serve someone else?