

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sunday Oct. 17, 2021 Proper 24B
Occasion of the Dedication of Cosmic Mosaic
Text: Mark 10:35-45
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

Today we are here to celebrate the Holy Eucharist as we do each Sunday but today also has the special character of celebrating the creation of our Cosmic Mosaic that now graces the walls of our Church and Montessori school. It's a stunning piece of art created by our community and the incredible talent of our lead artists Lisa Domenici and Manuel Hernandez. Our own members and Montessori students worked to shape fragments of mirror and tile into stars and create a cosmic swirl that tells of God's creation as one of our Eucharistic Prayers exclaims: "the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth our island home." (BCP p.370.) It's a project that is full of energy and life and makes the strong connection between our Montessori School and the Church even more visible.

I love looking at the mosaic and the incredible variety of stars that people young and old and everywhere in between made. It reminds me of the diversity of people in our congregation and our world that are called into life with God, called into following Jesus' way of love.

During Advent last year we heard a wonderful star themed song in our liturgy with the refrain:

God calls each star by name
They sing out "Here we are!"
 They shine with brilliant joy
For the one who made them all.

In the same way God calls each of us by name and desires that we respond to that call and shine with brilliant joy ourselves.

Today's Gospel is full of ambition. James and John two of the shining stars in Jesus' inner-circle ask Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." They have aspirations and they want the inside track. They want to reverse the order that Jesus has been talking about, they want Jesus to do their desires instead living into God's desire for them.

But Jesus is a good teacher, and good teachers are always intent on uncovering the hearts of the disciples. Nothing uncovers the heart like voicing desire.

Like a prudent parent, Jesus makes them say what it is they want, "What do you want me to do for you?"

They want to flank Jesus in glory, one on the right and one on the left. Their hearts are set on power and prestige on sharing in Jesus' glory. Jesus is the star to which they have hitched their aspirations. But Jesus is the wrong star for those seeking glory.

The irony of course is that Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, and despite the heaviness and foreboding that accompany this trip, the disciples are still hoping it ends in glory instead of suffering and death. Two robbers will in fact occupy those places that James and John are asking for and it will not end in glory. Yes, Jesus will be enthroned as king, his throne will be a cross and his crown one of thorns. The disciples do not know what they are asking. Their lives are star-crossed with Jesus but the path that this leads to is not what they are thinking.

Jesus knows that the disciples do not know what is ahead of them that they don't quite get it, they see but don't really comprehend the way of Jesus' passion and resurrection. What Jesus knows is a process: a cup of sorrow that becomes a cup of salvation, a baptism that is both death and resurrection. What Jesus is inviting the disciples and us into is a whole way of life denying yourself, taking up the cross, and losing your life for the sake of the Gospel in service of others. (Mark 8:34-35).

The text is an open challenge to complacency or apathy of anyone who calls themselves a follower of Jesus. Anyone who follows Jesus can be sure the pattern of his life will also be the pattern of theirs. Sometimes it feels like the gospel is presented as a no-risk offer but that is not what Jesus tells his disciples and when they realize what he is saying they are both amazed and fearful.

It's not that following Jesus doesn't lead to a life worth living, a life of joy. It doesn't mean that a life of forgiveness and compassion are not beautiful beyond knowing. Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, and us for that matter, that a life of discipleship will at times mean more trouble not less. To be sure following Jesus may limit some of the pain life has to offer but it is also decidedly disruptive. True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost.

Jesus came to serve and give his life. Anyone who contemplates following Jesus without a little fear and trepidation is not really paying attention. The path of discipleship is a challenging one and not one that involves an endless upward escalator to glory.

Of course, Jesus' teaching continues. Spiritual and social climbers always upset other spiritual and social climbers. The drive to be first makes others feel less than and conflict erupts. We become angry when our own self-will is challenged by the self-will of others. The grab for glory by James and John issues forth in a grab for glory in the other 10 disciples, as they become incensed by James' and John's nerve and ambition to ask for promotions.

The whole conversation and situation causes us to ask a really important question. What is greatness in the Kingdom of God? Or an even more personal question. How does my ambition play into all of this? James and John are ambitious. But is ambition really all bad? It's hard to imagine anybody who accomplished anything in life or in discipleship without a helpful

nudge from ambition. Ambition is the engine that drives some of our most noble accomplishments.

We've been taught to be ambitious, that's how you get somewhere. In fact, it can be dangerous not to admit to your ambitions especially if they go unrealized or unacknowledged and it leads to disappointment and resentment. We are humans, we have ambitions, we cultivate goals and desires within us. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't examine and strategize about our ambitions and acknowledge and then realistically critique our own ambitions. I can't think of any reason why ambition shouldn't be embraced as a natural, ever present partner in our discipleship – except for Jesus.

Jesus is perhaps the biggest reason to take hard look at our ambitions. He was always turning things upside down. The master becoming a servant. The rabbi talking to outsiders. Jesus modeled a style of leadership that we are called to emulate. Not only that, but Jesus seems to have a decided preference for those who were not wise, not powerful, not rich; in short, just the sort of people who were flops in the game of ambition. Even worse for our ambitiousness, he said repeatedly that we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him in his path toward downward mobility.

If we are to follow Jesus and exercise our perfectly human ambitiousness, then we've got to be ambitious for what Jesus cares about rather than what the American Way tells us to lust for.

I think that the trick to all of this is not to forswear or deny all ambition but rather to pray for the grace to align our ambition with God's desires. I don't think that choosing to follow Jesus is meant to stifle our ambitions or our passions but I do think that they are to be transformed toward their proper object, passionate love for God – willing service in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is perfectly willing to help rework your ambitions into something beautiful for God. It is possible to shine out with brilliant joy. I think that we can pray to be honest about our ambitions and to prayerfully examine our goals and our means for achieving them. In a way, I think that is what Jesus is asking of his disciples, are you willing to submit your ambitions to the person of Jesus and allow his life to help you critique those ambitions and to reform them into something even more beautiful and powerful, perhaps this is a way to take up your cross.

To tell you the truth, I often been puzzled by the phrase taking up your cross. On the surface it's not something that connects well to everyday life, its religious language that seems archaic. But what if we were to talk about Taking up your cross as letting go of one's ego, one's need to succeed and be first. Attaching yourself to the ego is a very small piece of real estate, a very small piece of the world. When we become fiercely attached to something really small, we actually limit our world. Detachment from the ego, from our need to control things, from our need to be appreciated and admired, from our need to be first is an opening to a larger dimension of life, a larger world, a cosmic possibility where God's unending life and energy is available.

Perhaps this strange little interview with an Administrator of Social Services will help to illustrate what we're talking about:

I catch myself in self-importance ten times a day-check that, five-well, maybe once. It's appalling anyway. A little flashbulb goes off and I'm exposed... like Jimmy Olsen caught Superman changing clothes in the phone booth.

Of course, whoever I'm with has probably been seeing all of this self-importance in me for hours before I ever notice. And my colleagues.... They've been shrugging or giving up for years. So, there's this sanctuary. And I've stopped trying to hide it. No, that's a lie! Don't trust this man! Don't print this interview!

What I've done really is I've begun. I've just started to watch myself as I go through these little prances. I actually have this exercise I sometimes perform. What I do when I catch myself being Mr. Administrator of Social Services is I get up out of my chair, walk away a few steps, stand for a moment and then turn around and walk back and sit down again. The one who is now seated is usually not the same one who was there before. I'm no longer that guy, Mr. Administrator. For a while anyway.

I should add that this exercise frequently appears quite mad to other people in the room, particularly if they're people who have come to me for some kind of assistance. ("This is the guy I've come to for help?") Funny. So, I perform these exercises at considerable cost to my aura of authority, you understand. But it is definitely worth it. Freedom is priceless... worth whatever the cost. (found in Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?: Stories and Reflections on Service* [New York: Knopf/Random House, Inc. 1985] 33-34)

The beautiful way is found in renouncing our own self-will- relinquishing our demand to have everything the way we want it all the time – this is to be free to entertain what we previously would have pushed away.

If we can let go, begin to relinquish our own self will our own self-centered living our own ambitions, then our life can open up, expand like the far-flung stars of the cosmic mosaic. The life of God is expansive and our hope is to find that expansive life by embracing the way of the cross and resurrection. By laying down our lives, by becoming servants to all. By daring to live for others instead of for ourselves.

I'm going to be honest; I find the idea of being servant to all somewhat overwhelming and frankly unattractive. I don't want to do everything people ask me to do or just get used up by everyone. Our service is not meant to be subservience to others. What does the gospel message mean about service?

The theologian John Shea says that service means, "discerning the lure of God in the life of others and committing ourselves to their response." Service entails first knowing another, listening to their life and supporting their response to the movement of God in their life. This

commitment may bring us into conflict with people who are invested in maintaining oppressive structures. So, in order to be faithful to service, we will have to “take up our cross.” But herein lies the joy of discipleship, there is joy in being part of the divine-human energy that infuses life and all of creation and that is fashioning a new humanity. It’s not the joy of an ego that controls things and limits others, it’s the joy of the soul that soars and expands like the ever-expanding cosmos. (Shea) As we cooperate with the divine, become disciples who continue to learn about self-giving and other-centered life, we find that our life enlarges, grows in abundance and generosity and spirals out toward others, expanding the range of God’s Cosmic Generosity and love which today we will celebrate in a joyous dedication of our Cosmic Mosaic. In a beautiful way our Cosmic Mosaic can be a reminder of what the life of following Jesus is all about, an ever-expanding circle of generosity where we are both a receiver and a giver, receiving from God’s abundance and then offering that back to the world in love and gratitude.

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They sing out “Here we are!”
 They shine with brilliant joy
For the one who made them all.

I’m indebted to the commentary of John Shea on this passage for its wonderful explication of the nature of service and the detachment from the ego as a spiritual task. I’m also indebted to the commentary on the Gospel of Mark by Lamar Williamson, Jr. from the Interpretation series.