

Date: October 19 2003

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 29

**SERMON: A Seating Chart for Disciples**

Text(s): Mark 10:32-45; Hebrews 4:23 - 5:10

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One cultural shift we've noticed that has taken place in the years we've lived out of the U.S., is that there's been a change in seating arrangements at wedding receptions. It seems the fashion of having a head table, where the bride and groom and the wedding party sit in lonely splendor is now passé. Instead, the wedding party are now dispersed with the other guests, preferring to sit with family or friends than be put on display at a head table. Changes in seating customs at public functions are social maps that chart changes in culture. Of course, at political fund-raising dinners, the head table model still applies. The political candidate is always at the head table, surrounded by the person acting as host or emcee, and the seating arrangements for everyone else reflect the size of their donations. Big donors get to sit closer to the head table—presumably to bask in the reflected glory emanating from the anointed candidate.

This social mapping by seating arrangement has been going on for a long time. Even Jesus' disciples played the game, as we see in our gospel lesson for today.

There is something Mark says in introducing this story that struck me as very strange. He says, "*They were on the road going to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed (shocked), and those who followed were frightened.*" Isn't that a strange way to introduce this story? Not exactly a picture of Jesus and his happy band of disciples, is it? Perhaps Mark intends us to see that the two previous announcements of Jesus' coming sufferings have begun to penetrate the consciousness of those following him, or perhaps it is the story just before this, that we looked at last week, where Jesus stressed the difficulty that the rich have in entering the kingdom that has his followers confused and afraid. But whatever it

means, this strange statement is followed immediately by Jesus' third announcement of his coming Passion in Jerusalem. If the statement introducing this third announcement is strange, what comes next is even stranger.

Almost as though they had been in outer space instead of listening to what Jesus said, two of his inner circle of friends and disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come up to Jesus and say to him, "*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*" Doesn't that sound like the question a six-year old child would ask? Mommy, will you say yes if I ask you a question?

"*We want you to guarantee that the two of us will get to sit on your right hand and on your left when you come into your kingdom.*" If James and John are among those who are shocked and frightened, they certainly don't show it. Instead, they display the most callous, most incomprehensible blindness and stupidity that we can imagine. Jesus has just told them that he's going to Jerusalem and there he will be seized, tortured, and finally executed, and all they are concerned about are the seating arrangements at the banquet of the kingdom of heaven. They not only do not want to be seated "below the salt," they want the positions reserved for the closest intimates, the most honored companions of the lord of the manor. How could they ask such a thing when Jesus has just told them what's in store for him, and likely for those who follow him in Jerusalem? How could they make such a self-serving request?

The other disciples evidently wondered the same thing, because Mark tells us that when they heard this exchange, they became angry with James and John. I suspect that their anger, was not entirely righteous anger, but rather anger that James and John were trying to push themselves ahead of the rest of the pack. And they all had ambitions to have the best seats in the house.

Jesus' response to this audacious request is rather blunt. "*You have no idea what you're asking for,*" he tells them. "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am about to be baptized?*"

“Yes, we are able” they reply, and their reply reveals their blindness for what it is, the blindness of pride, of self-serving egoism, of inordinate ambition to be recognized, to have status, to be “somebodies.”

Perhaps before we join the other disciples in condemning James and John too heartily, we ought to look into the mirror this text holds before us and see the status-conscious, ambitious, recognition-seeking person who stares back at us. We’ve all done our share of trying to arrange the seating chart in our favor, haven’t we? And we have been just as oblivious to the meaning of drinking the cup of Jesus or being baptized with his baptism as James and John were. There’s even a popular hymn that is built on their very words. It’s not in our new hymnal; but many of us probably know it. Do you know the one I mean?

*“Are you able,” said the Master*

*“To be crucified with me?”*

*“Yea,” the sturdy dreamers answered,*

*“To the death we follow thee.”*

*Lord, we are able, our spirits are thine,*

*Remold us, make us like thee divine.*

It’s a hymn full of noble sentiments; it’s got a stirring tune that is a joy to sing. But it completely misses the point of this story. According to Mark, at least, the affirmation of James and John “Yes, Lord, we are able to drink the cup that you drink and be baptized with your baptism,” is not an affirmation made in faith and loyalty, but an affirmation made in ignorance and arrogance. They’re ready to drink the cup if it is filled with champagne at the great banquet of the kingdom; whether they’re ready to drain the cup of suffering, of bitterness, of failure, of betrayal, of loneliness—well, that’s a that’s a horse of another color.

Jesus cuts through their self-serving arrogance and tells them bluntly, “*You speak more truly than you know. For you will drink the cup that I drink, and you will be baptized with the baptism with which I’m about to be baptized, but*

*the seating arrangements are not in my hands. The places of honor at this feast will be given to those for whom it has been prepared.*”

This exchange between Jesus and his two competitive, status-seeking disciples reminds me of the story about the two ranchers from Texas who were bragging to each other about the size of their respective cattle-raising operations. One of them said, “Well, I’ve got 15,000 head of cattle out there on the range branded with my ‘Flying A’ brand.”

“Flying A!” the other one sniffed. “My brand is the Bar T, Circle L, Cross Creek, Flying Z, Bent Fork, Double Back, North Canyon brand.”

“Wow!” said the first rancher. “How many cattle are you running?”

“Well,” the second rancher confessed grudgingly, “not as many as you have. Most of mine don’t survive the branding.”

James and John don’t survive the branding too well either. The stinging rebuke from Jesus must have set them back on their heels. But it has a salutary effect; it becomes the occasion for his teaching them about what it is that really gives a person status in the kingdom of God. “*Among the nations, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great men are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you: but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first in rank among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

That last statement is probably the key statement in this whole Gospel. It is key Mark offers us, not only for understanding Jesus, but for understanding our own lives as well.

In one of my congregations in New Jersey, there was a woman who was in her late forties then, and had been diagnosed about 15 years earlier with Multiple Sclerosis, a disease that almost invariably progressively cripples its victims. But Shirley was a woman of great

courage and faith, and she determined that this disease was not going to get the best of her. In addition to maintaining a very positive attitude, she developed an exercise program for herself that she stuck to religiously. She had to be very careful to get a proper amount of sleep, but otherwise, she was one of the most active people I knew. She ran a swimming program for the township, she was a full-time college faculty member, she headed one of the major committees in our church, she sang in the choir, and she never displayed any of the crippling symptoms of her disease. Her neurologists in Philadelphia even released her from regular checkups, and they were absolutely amazed that her disease appeared to be in complete remission, even though there is no known cure.

But it was not only for her faith and positive attitude that I most admired Shirley; rather it was her perception of herself as one who was called to be a servant to others who were diagnosed with this disease. Her response to her own struggles with this disease was to give herself unsparingly to help and encourage other MS sufferers.

One year a young couple in their early thirties with two young children moved into a house across the street from us. About six months after they moved in, the wife was diagnosed with MS. If that wasn't bad enough, just a month or so later, her husband, who was a test pilot for a company making dirigibles, was killed while conducting a test flight. There she was left alone with two little children, and facing her own life-threatening struggle with a crippling disease.

I called Shirley and told her the story of my neighbor. She immediately called this young widow and introduced herself and for the next several months, took her under her wing, so to speak. She began telling her own story to her. She encouraged her to begin a regular exercise program. She exhorted her to maintain a positive attitude. She testified to the power and strength

her faith gave her in enabling her to face her disease with fortitude and courage. She literally put herself at my neighbor's disposal. She told her to call her day or night if she needed support. She checked up on her regularly and let her know she wasn't alone.

My neighbor was really touched that someone who was a total stranger to her would take such an interest and give of herself so freely, sacrificing her own convenience and time to offer support and encouragement to her.

There's little doubt in my mind that Shirley has touched more lives for good in that small town in New Jersey than most of the captains of industry or the political leaders of government or the celebrities whose faces are plastered on the covers of magazines and the movies. Nor is there any doubt in my mind about who will have the better seat at the table in the kingdom of God. The best seats in the house go to the servants.

And perhaps now we can better understand why those who were with Jesus that day on the road to Jerusalem were shocked and frightened. Perhaps it was because they had begun to realize that if they were going to follow Jesus, really follow, and not just be hangers-on, they would have to give up their own competitive ambitions to be great, to have status, to sit at the best seats in the kingdom. They would have to learn how to serve instead of demanding to be served. And that is a frightening thought to those who have been living for themselves, for their own goals, their own convenience, their own agenda. To follow Jesus on the road of discipleship means that we consciously give up our ambition to have the best seats at the table, and take our places among the servants. A scary prospect? Absolutely! But in the end, it is the Shirleys of this world who are the signs of hope of God's ultimate redemption of the whole creation.