Church of the Redeemer,

Newton, Mass.,

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“Humility and Healing,”

Homily on Matthew 20:17-28,

by John Oakes
Jesus said: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."
(Mt. 20:26-7).

Most of us would agree that we live in a competitive society, where we are encouraged to show ambition and to strive for excellence from our earliest years. As they grow older, people often measure their success against that of others. In the workplace, many learn to see advancement as a sign of progress and achievement. So they push forward, hoping to climb the ladder and to have greater control over their circumstances.

And there's nothing necessarily wrong with all this, of course. It's good to want to succeed and to make the most of the gifts and talents that God gives us. Leadership is a valuable function and if we have gifts in that area, we are right to pursue them.

But most would also recognize that not all our motivations for ambition are equally good. If I want to advance in my career or my ministry, simply because I need to be in control, then I have a problem. So too, if I'm driven by greed or by obsessive work habits. Even a parent's ambitions for her children can sometimes be misplaced, as we find in our Gospel reading, if they ignore the bigger picture of God's purposes in our lives.
Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he directly prophesies, in verses 18 and 19, that he will die and rise again, when the mother of two of the disciples, James and John, approaches him with a request. "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom," she says in verse 21.

What this Mom is asking for might strike us as a bit excessive, because she’s really requesting that her two boys be given the seats of highest honour in heaven. But in other ways, this might seem a pretty honourable request. She could certainly ask for much less noble things for her sons.

Yet Jesus’ response is surprising. First, he asks James and John whether they are willing to "drink the cup," by which he means undergo the same kind of suffering, that he is about to on his journey to the cross. Then when they say that they are, he predicts that they will indeed suffer for their faith, but that they cannot be guaranteed any future position in heaven, because that remains in God the Father's gift alone.

What follows is the punchline, as it were, with which I began. The other disciples protest James and John's forwardness. So Jesus teaches them about true greatness in God's Kingdom. And his key point is very simple. "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and
whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.” (Mt. 20:26-7).

In other words, in the divine scheme of things, true leadership or success is not shown by lording it over others or by jockeying for positions of power or respect. It is reflected in service and humility. If we want to achieve good things for God, we are not to throw our weight around, but to serve. We are not to seek prestige, but to expect personal sacrifice.

So there's something of a paradox here. On the one hand, we are asked to contribute what we can and not to shy away from positions of responsibility. On the other, our highest goal should always be service of God and others and that will usually involve suffering and self-denial.

This is not an easy message, however many times we hear it, and it continues to challenge the church. But it lies at the very heart of the gospel, as we read in verse 28. For we follow a Lord who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many," when he died for our sins on the cross. And we are called to follow his example of self-sacrifice.

One of my favourite Christian authors is Bishop James Jones of Liverpool, whom I first knew nearly 30 years ago when he was an
associate vicar in England and a consulting editor of the Christian magazine which I then edited. In a book called Servant, James describes his own early struggles with the whole issue of servant ministry and how he resolved them in his life and work.

He begins by talking about a pivotal moment about a year after his ordination, when he came to the realization that his own ministry had already become a chore. Then James wrestles with some of the personal and theological issues that came out of that, before concluding with some very helpful comments about the version of our Gospel story in Mark 10 (35-45). And I quote from one of the most striking passages:

> When...Jesus [was asked] if he would allow... [James and John] to share in his glory by sitting on either side of him..., Jesus questioned whether they really understood...and whether they knew the suffering involved….He did not despise....spiritual ambitions. But as the Son of Man showed with his life, greatness and glory are not the rewards for service, they belong like freedom to the very act of self-giving.¹

“They belong like freedom to the very act of self-giving.” I love that sentence, and as I was considering our Gospel in the context of today’s Eucharist, I couldn’t help thinking that the ministry of healing prayer also involves self-giving, and not just on the part of the one who prays.
Because it’s not always easy to ask for help from others, is it, even from God? Especially when we’ve been encouraged, as most of us have, to fend for ourselves, it can actually be rather humbling and counter-cultural.

Yet there’s a mysterious sense in which we must first be willing to give of ourselves before we can receive from others. And when we reach out in ministry, we will only be really effective, if we are ready to seek the face and hand of God.

So as we pray for healing, we do so in Jesus’ name, not our own, and as we seek God’s help, we are asked to give enough of ourselves to come in faith that God can and will hear our prayers and respond. And why do any of this at all?

Because we worship of God of healing, who took the ills of our world so seriously that God sent God’s only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die and rise again for our sake. And because this same Jesus, in whose precious name we pray, “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a [healing] ransom for many.”

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