

Sermon October 21, 2012 “Upside Down Ladder?” Hebrews 5:1-10 Mark 10:35-45

In the years before 2008, it was common for people to be wrapped up in upward mobility. I lived in Southington then, and watched with chagrin as acre after acre of farmland was developed into small lots occupied by huge homes. Perhaps there was not one tree on the lot, but there was a huge mortgage. The newspaper listings of home sales repeated the story over and over: John and Jill Doe sold one house for \$210,000 and bought another for \$440,000. Everybody was climbing up the ladder, or so it was thought. One job was tossed away for a better one, with no concern for loyalty to a company. It was like surfing through life, aiming for something bigger and better each time. The only time somebody downsized was when something went wrong in their life. That was all before the economic crisis that sort of turned the “ladder” upside down for millions of people.

The quest for upward mobility is not limited to our country or our recent history, as the Gospel lesson so clearly shows us. James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, were trying to better their own situations. “Give us places of honor, Lord, when you come into your glory.” Instead, Jesus offered them a share of downward mobility, a very different kind of mobility than they were expecting. For to be great – in Jesus’ way of thinking – was to become a servant; and to be the greatest of all one must be a servant of all.

The 1980's and 1990's were decades where just about everybody wanted to make it “big.” Lee Atwater was one person who for a while truly seemed able to climb the ladder. While in his thirties, he became chairman of the Republican National Party. He knew how to operate in the political arena and he did it well. His political acuity and ruthless ambition were – he claimed – a major factor in the first President George Bush's ascent to power. Atwater thought nothing of destroying an opponent’s reputation. His mode of operating was to punish anybody who crossed him. His “ladder” got turned upside down, though.

While still at the top of his political career, at the age of 39, Lee Atwater was stricken with inoperable brain cancer. At first he used his amazing strength and determination to try to get better, everything from “positive thinking” to holistic masseurs to religion, which he had held in disdain for most of his life. He started reading the Bible, talking to ministers and religious leaders, and was even baptized.... At first, he was grasping at straws, but later, he claimed to have truly found Jesus Christ. During agonizing months of "downward mobility," Atwater repented. He went about making amends and offering apologies to those persons who had been victimized by his earlier ruthlessness. Shortly before his death, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Atwater said, "The eighties were about acquiring wealth and power and prestige – and I acquired more than most. But I learned something important recently, that you can acquire all you want and still be empty! It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with this truth." (From an article by John Brady of *The Washington Post*, December, 1996)

It is important that, somewhere along life's way, we check to see in which direction we are trying to head. For Lee Atwater it took a disease he could not control, for James and John it took the shocking explanation by Jesus that greatness in the kingdom meant a life of service and sacrifice.

James and John had witnessed Jesus' power, they had seen people healed and lives changed, and they wanted to be able to take an important role in that kingdom he talked about. But they did really understand what this meant.

Author Wilbur Rees once wrote: "I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine... I want ecstasy, but not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want about a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please."*

"How many of us settle for \$3 worth of God? We don't want to get rid of God entirely, just enough to keep Him manageable. About a sack full of the Almighty, that'll do it. A sack full, nothing more. Just enough to keep my guilt level below the threshold of pain, to guarantee escape from eternal flames. I mean, come on, you don't expect me to change my life, do you? I'd like a crown, thank you, not a towel. Leave the foot-washing for someone else!" As crass as this is, I can identify with it....

*Wilbur Rees, *\$3.00 Worth of God* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1971). Quoted in Chuck Swindoll's March Message from *Insight for Living*, (edited here by fte)

The context of today's Gospel lesson is important: The disciples were traveling with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. At the beginning of the journey, Jesus had healed a blind man whose "sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (8:22-26). During the journey, Jesus' disciples seemed unable to see *anything* clearly. Three times Jesus predicted his impending death: – After the first prediction, Peter rebuked him (8:31-33), only to be rebuked in return. Jesus then proceeded to teach the crowd and the disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). – After the second prediction, the disciples argued about who was greatest (9:34), right after which Jesus taught them that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). – In today's lesson, after the third prediction, James and John asked Jesus for preferred seating "in your glory" (10:37), which prompted Jesus to warn the disciples, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (10:44). Even so, the disciples *still* didn't "get it." Following this episode with James and John, Jesus healed another blind man, who "regained his sight and followed him on the way" (10:46-52). The stories of blind men whose vision was healed serve as **brackets** around the stories of the disciples who just could not see.

We may find it hard to understand how James and John could be so dense – so blind. Preacher Hal Luccock suggests that their request was wrong because "they were asking Jesus to fit into their plans" rather than trying to see how they might fit into Jesus' plans (Luccock, 812).

Jesus' plan is a whole new way of gaining power in life: by giving one's own power up for the sake of others. The "cup" he would take would be his death as his blood was poured out for us all....and this same way of giving up life was what the disciples could not grasp.

Now I want to tell you about a woman who *has* been able to grasp what Jesus was talking about. She is a highly respected physician here in Connecticut and a woman of deep compassion and joy. She went with my husband and ten others to Africa this month through the Methodist VIM (Volunteers in Mission) program. The group went into a remote and very poor area, where this woman and the team offered medical care to hundreds of people, young and old, who lined up for days in order to have a chance to receive it. In Connecticut this woman is a specialist, but in Africa she dealt with malaria, worms, tumors, and all sorts of maladies. The mission guidelines suggest that each team should work for three days and then take a day off, but this doctor took no time off, nor did the dentist who was with them or the rest of the team, for every day more people came than could be seen. In addition to seeing hundreds of patients, people in the town in which the team was staying - some 45 minutes travel from the clinic – discovered that this woman was a doctor and went to her before and after her clinic travel. But the story continues: When the group was on their Delta Airlines jet finally relaxing on the way home, an hour or so into the flight there was a call, “Is there a doctor on board?” This woman once again responded and tended to a man who was having a very serious allergic reaction. She remained at this man’s side for the remaining eight hours of the flight. Woody’s take on this woman: she is truly a saint! This doctor was willing to be a servant.

So it is possible, even in our day, to accept the challenge Jesus has put before us. Not just for a mission trip, and not just if one happens to have a medical degree. Each of us, as long as we are breathing, must choose every day whether to “climb the ladder” to serve ourselves or perhaps “go down the ladder” to help someone else. Jesus made it clear that there is greater blessing in being a servant.

Those disciples were dense, but so are we. We have the stories of the Gospels that teach us to honor service rather than power, but we all-too-often fail to do so. I want comfort, I want my own schedule, I can’t give much of my money or time away, I need..... What *do* we really need? Jesus wants to wake us up, to let us know that God honors service instead of power. He challenges us to re-think how we’re looking at life and to begin living by Kingdom Rules NOW.

Several years ago in *Sojourner's* magazine a writer shared his experience with his four-year old son: "One morning I was running late getting Pete ready for school. I had his shirt and pants on and was hurriedly putting on his socks. He was a bit fidgety so I decided to make some small talk with him and take his mind off his restlessness. 'Pete,' I said, 'I really like your shirt. It looks real nice.' He was reflective for a moment as he inspected his shirt. About thirty seconds passed and I had dismissed the remark from my mind. But Peter hadn't. In a serious, almost solemn tone, he asked me, 'Do you really like it, Dad?'

Surprised that he was still thinking about it, I said, 'Sure Pete, I really do.' In all seriousness, he said to me, 'Well, I'll give it to you when you get little.'"

We may laugh about a boy thinking that his daddy would some day become small enough to wear a four-year-old's shirt, because most of what we emphasize in life is growing bigger, standing taller, making more and not less of a splash in life.

The scriptures would have us view life differently. Jesus told his disciples that in order to become great, they needed to become servant of all. God seems to say to us: "When you get little enough, you will see; when you let go of yourself enough to reach out to me, I will give you life."

We cannot see what God sees. We cannot see the entire picture, we cannot know all the aspects or possibilities of any occurrence. But we CAN (and must) remember the way God has moved through human history: God's ways are not our ways; and the living Word of God - Christ Jesus - came into human life to lay his own life down for us... And to call us to do the same for others.

You may remember the old story of the difference between heaven and hell. The vision was given that heaven and hell both contain wonderful banquet tables laden with food, where hungry people can come to eat. But there is a catch: in both heaven and hell, the people must eat with six-foot long utensils and elbows that could not bend. The difference between hell and heaven was only one thing: in hell the people struggled to feed themselves, and never could get any food to their own mouths. In heaven, the people fed each other, and all were satisfied.

"Lord, I want to get ahead, I want to be happy, I want to have meaning in my life, I need reassurance, I want this, I want that, give me peace, give me health, help me..."

And the Lord may reply to us, "You do not know what you are asking.. Follow me, and you must be servant to all..." In following Jesus this way, we will discover abundant life, even as we "downsize." May we hear, see, and then risk doing so.

Let us pray: "O God, open our eyes and our hearts to what you would have us see, to the way you would have us use our lives... Help us to give up our desire for power and prestige, and to be willing to stoop, even bend down, to serve in the name and way of Christ Jesus. Amen."