

## Gospel - Mark 10: 35-45

### Pentecost 21 Proper 24

Sermon 1.17.21

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Dear Lord, let us do...that which you ask of us. We are your servants. Amen

My husband used to coach youth soccer. But being a Bellevue boy, he learned the sport as a youth and carries a love of the game to this day. Woe be it to anyone who interrupts a World Cup match, a Sounders game...or pretty much anything on TV involving a black and white ball.

Both our kids played soccer throughout their youth, and we traveled all over the state and beyond to stand, shivering, on the sidelines, analyzing their every move.

I submit that soccer is a metaphor for life: If you want to win, you have to be a little selfish. How many times have I seen a young person mess around, mess around, mess around in front of the goal, trying to set up the perfect, TV-worthy score, while coaches and fans are yelling "Shoot!" And then the team misses the opportunity.

It's easy to become too selfish, though. That role is filled by the "Ball Hog," the player who thinks she's the only one on the team who can and should score goals. Knowing what we all do about teamwork, that's a recipe for disaster, too. And that's what James and John wanted from Jesus.

In our gospel today, the brothers from Zebedee don't show themselves in a flattering light by jockeying for position in the post-resurrection world. They are purposefully angling for the seats next to Jesus as he ascends to the throne.

Ambition is not a bad thing. We're hard wired to be ambitious. In fact, I would suggest that's how God created us. But ambition with a purpose – that's what Jesus is trying to teach.

So if James and John are the ambitious ball hogs, what about the other ten?

If you've watched little kids play soccer, you've probably seen the gnat effect: all the kids on both teams swarm like gnats around the ball, following it to and fro in a frenzy to put their mark on it. Sometimes they even trip over the ball and everyone ends up in a pile, kicking at the air. It's pretty entertaining, and no one gets hurt in the fall, because they're already so close to the ground at that age.

I can imagine all those soccer moms and dads in the mini-vans on the way to practice: "OK, Brita, you need to get in there and KICK THE BALL!" "Jamie, today you're going to GET that ball and GO for the goal!" That translates to "The ball. The ball. The ball." The ball is the center of their soccer universe.

In our gospel, the other ten disciples are the gnats. They're angry with James and John because those two hogged the ball when they all wanted to play!

Little kids often forget that there's a point to their play, while those on the sidelines are all too aware. In soccer, that's winning the game – putting the ball in the goal, not just kicking it around the field or holding the ball more than your teammates. In life, even when we think we are serving God, we are often gnats or ball hogs pursuing selfish goals.

So the twelve disciples: They're gnats or their ball hogs, but either way, they've got it wrong. Jesus doesn't rebuke James and John for being ambitious or misdirected. Instead, he explains to them all: it's not about wealth or position. It's about serving. Sacrifice. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

But now, back to the soccer game. Dick has a hundred funny stories of his coaching days, but one of my favorites came from a kid who was 6 years old. Dick had just finished explaining to these first and second graders the finer points of playing position, a point that was all but lost on these kids, but for one: "Mr. Case, Mr. Case!" called the little boy, who had drawn a three-foot circle in the sand around himself. "If the ball comes in here, I'm gonna get it!"

In our service as Christians, some of us are like the swarm of gnats. We go after everything, we don't play our position, we wind up mowing down other people in our pathway in our haste to get it all right. Maybe, we're even the "Ball Hog," sacrificing the team's win for our own glory. Sometimes, though, we're like the little boy who draws a line in the sand.

Of course, we all need to set boundaries for ourselves. We've got jobs, we need to spend time with family, we have to preserve our physical and mental health or we need to care for another in their infirmity. But in this season where we consider our gifts to the church, perhaps we owe it to ourselves to ponder this question: What is God asking us to do? And are we drawing a line in the sand when we say we can't volunteer, we don't have that capacity, we aren't able to develop that skill set? Are we doing what God wants us to do, or are we focusing only on what we want?

Jesus asks James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" And they blithely say, "We are able."

They didn't know what they were saying at the time. They were fighting to be first in line, but they didn't have any idea where the line would lead. As it says in our first reading from Isaiah 53, written hundreds of years before Jesus came into the world: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain."

And in our lesson from Hebrews today: "He learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." He became human, he lived among mortals like us with all our weaknesses. He didn't sit on a throne or wear a bejeweled crown, and in probably the most profound demonstration of service we find in the Bible, he washed his disciples' feet. And then. Then he died on the cross not just for himself, but for all of us.

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Not just to serve, but to be a slave, according to Mark's passage.

Servants and slaves don't have a lot of say in what they do. They do what their masters tell them to do. As we think about pledging our time, talent and treasure for the coming year, we might think about drawing that line in the sand a little bigger. Or maybe just erasing that line entirely and listening to what He wants.

I can't say it better than it's been said before, so in closing I'd like to ask you to turn to our "Hymn of Praise" on page 3 of our bulletin. Please read these words with me:

May we learn to become your Kingdom

May we be your kindness and truth!

Love is our calling, gift of your presence;

Children of God, and spirit of Jesus:

God is alive! Alleluia!

Amen.