

Jesus' View of Greatness
Mark 10:35-45
The Palisades Community Church, Washington, DC
October 21, 2018
95th anniversary service
Rev. Elizabeth Hagan

What a triumphant day we've had already had! The music, the special guests, the joy that is present in this room because we've gathered, seen friends and hugged necks of people we love.

Big moments in life are worth celebrating, marking, claiming, naming and owning! Aren't they? Today, we are turning 95 years old.

To live to 95 years young as a citizen of this planet is no small thing. While Americans are living longer and longer these days, still not so many folks make it to 95. A recent census stated that folks 90 and older make up only 4.7% of the national population.

Turning 95 years young is no small thing. (SAY IT WITH ME)

And when it comes to churches, researchers offer us this: that most congregations begin to experience a slow to then steady decline leading to extinction after 30-40 years. They don't make it much past that.

Turning 95 years as a church is no small thing. (SAY IT WITH ME)

And though statistics shift all the time, the average new church plant these days only lasts 3-5 years before closing due to lack of resources.

I'll say it again. Turning 95 years as a church is no small thing. (SAY IT WITH ME).

I wonder if our founding mothers and fathers imagined that we, the caretakers of this place in the community would still be going in the year 2018?

Yet regardless, here we are 95 years later, celebrating 95 years of God's love going forth from this building. Celebrating children who have been dedicated or baptized here. Celebrating couples that have been married here. Celebrating

youth have learned of their unique purpose and value here. Remembering loved ones who have blessed into the life beyond here.

I'll say it again. 95 years as church is no small thing.

Last weekend, I had the opportunity to be with another congregation at a retreat center outside of Baltimore, exploring how we are the church in days like these. One of the most frequent questions I was asked by retreat goers that I just met was, "Tell me about your church."

I know the question had something to do with the fact that it was a gathering of very committed Presbyterians... they had a lot of curiosity about this Baptist in their midst especially as I said I pastored a community church in the Palisades neighborhood of DC.

One retreat goer went on to ask, is your church one of those new-fangled things meets in a movie theater with your sermons projected on a big screen and a rock band? For that's all they imagined a community church to be—a new church start.

I saw some jaws drop when I said this weekend we'd be celebrating 95 years together. What kind of church is that?!? Wow.

I went on to add about this how this congregation began with a group of neighbors getting together to talk about the possibility of forming a Sunday School for their children where everyone would be welcome—no matter their denominational background or affiliation. . .

I told them about how throughout your history you've had pastors of all different flavors—

Anglican, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Church, Presbyterian and so on . . .

And that through the years you've grown, changed and modeled into truly an ecumenical church with two feet planted in a neighborhood ministry (many of you even walked to church today) . . . a ministry that welcomes youth groups, senior groups, preschool groups, active moving groups and many more.

You really should have seen their faces. I know it has to do with the fact that so many people are used to one vision of church. And we aren't that.

I guess, even in our mere existence we're holy troublemakers.

And so, I'll say it again, 95 years is no small thing. (SAY IT WITH ME).

I guess if you came for a solely ra ra talk this morning, I could just stop there... but you know me better than that, don't you? I like a challenge.

This morning I couldn't think of a more perfect gospel story to read in conversation with our 95-year celebration than the one we just heard read from Mark's gospel. A story that seeks to re-define our what we're in the business of celebrating in the first place.

For here's the scene: Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem with his disciples close to his side. It's going to be his last trip to town, for if we keep reading, we see that only a couple chapters over we're going to learn of Jesus' trial and ultimately his crucifixion.

Yet, in this moment, James and John, the super brother duo has come forward, saying to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to for us whatever we ask of you."

Could you just imagine that? It would be like one of us standing up during prayer request time and outlining how we want God to answer our prayers before we even share what we want prayers for.

Dear, kind Jesus responses in the affirmative to James and John: Ok: "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And so, James and John go on: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

So, like a kid in elementary school bugging, and nagging and bugging some more his teacher to be line leader or door holder, James and John wanted to beat the other disciples to the punch. They wanted their teacher to give them the best jobs too.

And so, I can just imagine how proud these two must have been of their request. I mean they asked first. How smart they were to ask. As Barbara Brown Taylor once offered in a reading of this passage, "There are only so many head tables in

the world, after all, and the game of musical chairs never stops.” Clearly, James and John knew this and wanted the BEST seats in the kingdom of God when the music stopped.

And not only this but they were showing Jesus that they believed in his divinity. They knew that he would rise to the heavens one day (thus the reference to glory) SO OF COURSE, JESUS WOULD PICK THEM for their early confession of belief.

But here’s the thing that commentator Rolf Jacobson helps us get to quickly: “James and John got that Jesus was the real deal. *But they do not understand the nature of the deal.*”

They do not understand what is involved in walking the walk of Jesus. They do not understand that Jesus’ path going forward will be paved in suffering, pain and great loss. And so, if they want to sit at his right and at his left, then they’d be signing up for the same.

Maybe this is why Jesus replies: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

I think most interpreters of this text are quick to scold James and John, laugh at their crazy request, but I don’t want you to hear me doing that today.

Because so many us—good hearted, church going people, walk in the Zebedee brothers’ shoes. For we too, if we were honest, want something good for ourselves in the end. For we too, want a place of honor.

Furthermore, aren’t the rules of the world based on a “trickle-down effect?”

We tell ourselves it’s ok go to use our time to climb up the corporate ladder even if we see our loved ones less and less.

We tell ourselves it’s ok to cozy up to those with political leverage even if it costs us our souls.

Or we take jobs or board seats at organizations where we can “bring our best people in” so that we can shift the balance of power in a direction we think is more moral, more helpful to the world even if the stress of it all destroys our health in process.

We tell ourselves is ok to do whatever it takes to get in the room where the power players are—because we are going to be the exception to the rule. We are going to use our power for good.

Yet to all of this, Jesus has message. Jesus had a direct message: *“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be salve of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to his life a ransom for many.”*

Or in business terms, Jesus is saying I have no use for your strategic plans where somebodies get the seats of honor and others don’t. Instead, of your “trickle-up” power plays, follow me and live out “ultimate trickle-up effect” The power God gives us in abundance is the power to serve.

I’ll say it again: **the power God gives us in abundance is the power to serve.**

I cannot think of a better message, my friends and dear guests this morning on our 95th anniversary Sunday than this.

For, if we are people who are still interesting in following after the teachings of Jesus, teachings like allowing the last to be first and the first to be last—as we’ve just heard—then today cannot be swallowed up in pompous thoughts of how great we are to have made it longer than most.

Nor can it be a season in our life together where we think thoughts like, “Well, if we just make it to 100 years then, we’ll have had a good run.”

“Or, at least we’re still here. Who cares if we don’t do much till we die out, at least we’ll have had each other for this time.”

Or a singular focus on our assets, our building, our programs or what’s in our bank accounts.

Or making plans for our future solely on what kind of recognition, status or returning to the glory days of great-ness that so many of us would like to go back to.

Nope. We can’t get distracted by any of that.

This is our time church to think about how Jesus might be calling us to be great because of how we've served others, for how we invested in the lives of the littlest among us, and how we've supported the most forgotten folks in our neighborhood and in our city.

That my friends, is what being a Christian church is all about.

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.”

The trickle up affect, you see, is that as we all do what we can . . .

To lift up the young adult who can't pay their bills,

Or the senior who is so depressed they can't get out of bed after yet again another surgery . .

Or the youth that doesn't have one single adult in his life who really SEES him . . .

Or the new mom who is just trying to figure out faith for the first time.

Don't get me wrong, of course, it is awesome that we've made it 95 years as a church... it is truly is awesome.

But what's even greater? BEING the church till it's just time to not be the church anymore in this place. Being known as servers in this community who put the needs of others above ourselves.

So won't you practice with me this morning these words of Jesus. Say it with me.

“Whoever wishes to become great must be a servant.”

May it be said about us as a congregation in all our days to come!

AMEN