Pentecost 22B. October 20, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.
Job 38:1-7, (34-41),Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

The Gospel

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The Sermon

When I was in Sitka (Alaska) for a few days last June, I stopped by the Lutheran church – right across the street from the famous Russian orthodox church -- and I chatted with a volunteer selling popcorn in front of the church and then inviting people inside to view the historic building. Turns out he was a Methodist minister, up from Illinois to help out during their pastoral transition. So, colleague to colleague, I asked him what he had preached on the past Sunday. "Politics," he said. I was astonished. I thought, oh, boy, this better be good. "So, what did you say?" I asked. "Well, I told them, right now 100% of you are anxious about the upcoming election. And on November 6 or 7, 50% of you will think you will die because the wrong person was elected."

"Yes," I agreed. "So, he said, I didn't preach on the Gospel; I preached on the 23rd psalm. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me."

Whew. Yes. I have thought about this almost daily ever since that conversation. I hope it will also give you some comfort in the weeks to come. We'll be here in church the day before and the day after Election Day to pray and to read psalms and enjoy fellowship with one another.

\+ + +

In today's Gospel, we see the *diabolos* at work. As Bishop Scott explained it here a while back, the "devil" or "*diabolos*" was the great divider always seeking to cause strife between people. Jesus on the other hand was the great unifier – praying always for us to be one, to be united in the Spirit.

James and John wanted to be chosen prime minister and chief of staff in Jesus' kingdom. Their fellow-disciples, the "ten" became angry with James and John – and rightly so! They would have to be subservient to those two who felt so entitled!

Jesus tells them they don't know what they're asking for. When Jesus is in his glory on the cross, the ones "to his right and to his left" are also crucified! "You can't drink the cup I will drink," he tells James and John.

The "*diabolos*" is busy dividing the disciples. Perhaps we might see this same work in our national politics. No one disputes that we should have choices in our elections. But no one should condone violence, lies, and political ads filled with hate – it all seeks to divide us.

\+ + +

The disciples then hear Jesus talk about being servants one to another. The disciples would experience holy week with Jesus: Palm Sunday, the foot-washing at the last supper, the horrible death and then finally the resurrection on Easter: well, they were never the same again. When such radical servanthood is witnessed, people are united.

Eventually they learned to drink the cup that Jesus drank. Most of the disciples were killed for their witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus. They followed the example of the man who became their exalted Lord and who told them that he "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Jesus served them and us by dying and rising and connecting us with God. We – as they were – are changed by the Holy Spirit when we come to

believe and trust this connection. So, like those disciples of old, we too find that our lives take a new direction.

In this week's email to you I quoted Martin Luther, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[1] He sounds almost as countercultural and paradoxical as Jesus. You see, we <u>are</u> perfectly free – thanks to Jesus' teachings and forgiveness. "Love God and do what you will," my mom used to say. Yet, we are bound by the teaching of LOVE to willingly and gladly serve one another. It sounds like a paradox, but it's a joyful situation that we experience when the Holy Spirit breaks our hard hearts open and we learn the meaning of faith and the joy of service.

\+ + +

I have two stuffed animals with me this morning. The little dog is tired and bedraggled, has been mended over and over, needs mending now, is well over a half-century old. The larger, fresher-looking bear has a bow and would make a nice gift for someone. If I were to ask any of our children which one they would like to have, they would certainly choose the fresh, new one.

If they were to choose the old one, however, I would not part with it. It has served me well. It comforted me in my crib and during my childhood, heard many conversations during my teen years and still occupies a special spot in my heart.

If you had a chance at the end of your life to <u>look like</u> one of these two stuffed animals, which one would you choose? The one that was worn out from serving, that had been loved back, and that had given up some of its very self in the process? Or the fresh, new one, still waiting for service?

Much of the serving you do is seen by only one or two people – the people you live with or the people you work with. Some of the serving you do will feel fruitless, might even be trampled on by those you love, might discourage you to the core of your being. But never give up trusting the power of the Holy Spirit to support you and to change others.

You are called to serve your family – sometimes by stopping an argument, giving in when you might rather have the last word. By playing games or

[1] Three Treatises, Fortress Press, 1970, p. 277

offering any of the other so-called small gifts of time that children delight in. By spending what seems like endless hours driving kids around, then patiently helping them learn to drive, and worrying when they do. By supporting them through the mistakes of young, even mature adulthood. By feeding your aging parent, by taking a job that pays less so that you can be freed to be really present with your family, by inviting a cranky relative for dinner, by accompanying someone to their doctor's or therapist's appointments – and by making hard decisions. It sometimes wears us out like decades of wear and tear have worn out my little stuffed dog.

There are a lot of good examples of service here: our Monday program is the most prominent, but much goes on behind the scenes that serves this community. There is a place of service for every one of you here. Just ask me if you are not sure where!

\+ + +

When deacons are ordained – with all appropriate and beautiful high Episcopal ceremony – they are charged with caring for the poor, the needy, and the troubled. As an ordination gift, Bishop Rickel used to hand the deacons a used dishcloth from his own kitchen drawer. "This is the only gift you will receive from me," he said. No glory, no upward mobility. Why do people like many of you here – step forward to take up the dishcloth and seek to clean up the trouble of the world? Sheer love of Christ, I believe.

Jesus took hold of the cup of condemnation and drank it to the end. He turned things upside down by supporting and loving the people beneath him: people like us. God turns and takes the empty cup of condemnation which Jesus drank and refills it with his blood, making it the cup of salvation for all who trust Christ for new life.

Jesus gives us the personal strength to serve where he calls us. We can afford to become bedraggled and in need of mending – like my little stuffed dog – because our eternal mending and abundant life are assured. And, though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for God is with us. Amen.