

Sunday, October 21, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Today, we return to the lectionary and journeying with Jesus toward Jerusalem.

He is moving from town to town, gathering crowds, teaching, and healing.

As he travels between communities, his disciples accompany him.

In an earlier conversation he has foretold his death and resurrection.

In this particular passage James and John, brothers who are seeking a place of prestige and security, approach him.

They want to ensure that they will remain in Jesus' inner circle, regardless of what happens to him.

Read the gospel according to Mark 10: 35-45.

Sermon – “Pick Me, Pick Me!”

Carl Jung said “You are what you do, not what you say you'll do.”

James and John are campaigning for a spot in the new administration.

Their imaginations have not quite grasped the idea of God's Kingdom.

They are thinking about Jesus' rise to power as one that will happen in the context of their lives.

They are hoping that when Jesus becomes King, they can have the seats on either side – be his deputies.

They envision a life of power and prestige.

When the other disciples hear that James and John have already lobbied for the key positions, they are angry.

Not sure if they are angry at the brothers for asking first or for trying to manipulate Jesus.

What we have in today's passage is another clear example of the timeless nature of scripture.

We live in a world where the quest for greatness has become almost obsessive.

Everything - from corporations to churches to individuals - is measured by the size of buildings, bank accounts or networks.

And, while the growth of social media has connected us as never before, it has also created a whole new competition for greatness as we strive for ever increasing numbers of "friends," followers," or "visitors".

This desire to be "special" or "exceptional" is not new.

James and John wrestled with it as they secretly approached Jesus hoping to secure the best seats in God's Reign.

The other disciples had it too, which is why they got so upset when they heard what James and John had done.

In the Old Testament, Job, who had perhaps become a little too obsessed with his own righteous suffering, was faced with a God who reminded him of his place.

This week's readings present two very important challenges.

The first is to define greatness differently - in terms of service and sacrifice for others.

The second challenge is to give up our quest to be extraordinary, and embrace the simplicity, the humility and the ordinariness of following Jesus just where we are.

In a world driven crazy by the quest for greatness, embracing the glory of our own ordinary lives may be one of the most significant contributions we can make!

Twenty centuries after James and John embarked on their campaign, we find ourselves listening to the same type of exchange with our political candidates.

Humility and service are not something that the debate prep team encourages the candidates to show.

The public, it seems, wants leaders who are exceptional, perfect – possessing the ability to know everything and the fortitude to stand up to relentless, senseless attacks.

Jesus however, envisions something very different in a leader.

Jesus is a radical.

Think about it.

He lives outside the prescribed order of the day, traveling from town to town with a group of men, suggesting that nothing is as it seems.

Every time the disciples think they have figured it all out, he puts them in their place.

Imagine being the 'spin doctors' for Jesus.

Every time you tell him what he ought to do, he does something different.

And just when you think he is going to rise to power, with you by his side, he suggests that you will be last – a servant in his kingdom.

Perhaps we ought to allow ourselves to be directed by God, rather than directing God's actions ourselves.

I came upon a folktale in my reading this week that spoke to this dilemma.

It is called the three trees. I want to share it with you:

Once upon a mountain top, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up. The first little tree looked up at the stars and said: "I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I'll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!" The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. "I want to be traveling mighty waters and carrying powerful kings. I'll be the strongest ship in the world!" The third little tree looked down into the valley below where busy men and women worked in a busy town. "I don't want to leave the mountain top at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me they'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I will be the tallest tree in the world."

Years passed. The rain came, the sun shone and the little trees grew tall. One day three wood cutters climbed the mountain. The first wood cutter looked at the first tree and said, "This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the first tree fell. "Now I shall make a beautiful chest, I shall hold wonderful treasure!" the first tree said.

The second wood cutter looked at the second tree and said, "This tree is strong. It's perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the second tree fell. "Now I shall sail mighty waters!" thought the second tree. "I shall be a strong ship for mighty kings!"

The third tree felt her heart sink when the last wood cutter looked her way. She stood straight and tall and pointed bravely to heaven. But the wood cutter never even looked up. "Any kind of tree will do for me." He muttered. With a swoop of his shining ax, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the wood cutter brought her to a carpenter's shop. But the carpenter fashioned the tree into a feed box for animals. The once beautiful tree was not covered with gold, or treasure. She was coated with saw dust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals. The second tree smiled when the wood cutter took her to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ship was made that day. Instead the once strong tree was hammered and awed into a simple fishing boat. She was too small and too weak to sail to an ocean, or even a river, instead she was taken to a little lake. The third tree was confused when the wood cutter cut her into strong beams and left her in a lumberyard. "What happened?" The once tall tree wondered. "All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountain top and point to God..."

Many days and nights passed. The three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night, golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feed box. "I wish I could make a cradle for him." Her husband whispered. The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone on the smooth and sturdy wood. "This manger is beautiful." She said. And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake. Soon a thundering and a thrashing storm

arose. The little tree shuddered. She new she did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the wind and the rain. The tired man awoke. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, "Peace." The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

One Friday morning, the third tree was startled when her beams were yanked from the forgotten wood pile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hand to her. She felt ugly and harsh and cruel. But on Sunday morning, when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It had made the third tree strong. And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God. That was better than being the tallest tree in the world.

The next time you feel down because you didn't get what you wanted, sit tight and be happy because God is thinking of something better to give you.

Let the words of Forrest Church be your breath prayer for this week:

“Want what you have, do what you can and be who you are.“