

SERMON
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee
The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)
October 18, 2015

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24B, Revised Common Lectionary
Mark 10:35-45

“Ordering our Loves”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is it that you love? What is your passion, your intrigue, your vice? We all have different lists of loves, but the struggle to balance our loves is familiar to us all. When we are not careful, some of our loves rise up too high while others slide down too low. Knowing this struggle, St. Augustine of Hippo teaches us: “Virtue is rightly ordered love.”¹

We see an example of disordered love in our reading from St. Mark’s Gospel this morning. On the long walk from Galilee to Jerusalem, our Lord teaches his friends about a reality called the Kingdom of God. Unlike the cities of this world, the Kingdom of God is a reality without social division, without discrimination, without poverty or warfare or violence. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, miss this point entirely, asking Jesus if they can sit to his right and to his left when this kingdom comes. In the words of one contemporary preacher, “[They begin angling] for cabinet posts in the new Jesus Administration.”² Jesus spoke of what the world can and will be when the God’s Kingdom comes in its fullness; James and John wanted to protect their old social hierarchies.

In one of his last sermons, Dr. Martin Luther King says that James and John are being driven by their “drum major instinct – a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first.” The drum major instinct is not always a bad thing, because associations of people tend not to move forward unless someone guides the way. Dr. King himself said that he would like to be remembered as a drum major – a drum major for justice, for peace, for righteousness. Our spiritual challenge is not being out in front, but what we do with the responsibility of being there. Dr. King concludes, “Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity.”³

The problem with James and John Zebedee’s request is that it lacks virtue; it reflects disordered love. Jesus does not want his followers to lead for their own sake, he wants to turn the world on its head: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Chapter XV, Book 22.

² Scott Hoezee. The Lectionary Gospel for Proper 24B:
http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-24b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Drum Major Instinct.” February 4, 1968.
http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/

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.”

Jesus’ metaphor here is important: When a ransom is paid, the captive goes free. Through Jesus’ sacrifice, we are released from the ways of the world. We are released from the burdens of self-interest. We are freed to serve other people.

Forgive me a personal illustration: A few years back, I took on some additional responsibility in the job that I had at the time, and my compensation increased. I resolved that I would continue living on my old budget and that I would save or invest the difference. After about a year, I realized that my expenses had increased along with my income. Slowly, things that I had never had before became things that I could not live without. My old budget had served me well, yet I came to feel as though my new budget was not enough. In short, my loves had become disordered. My perception of social expectations had crowded out my desire to save and my commitment to give. Like the sons of Zebedee, I had unconsciously slipped back into the ways of the world. I had surrendered a measure of my freedom.

Freedom is not the ability to live completely without restriction. Freedom is the power to choose. Freedom is the power to define our own lives rather than having other people define our lives for us. Freedom is the strength to know that our self-worth is not determined by our place in any social hierarchy. This is the freedom for which Jesus paid our ransom, and the freedom that the Zebedee brothers and I had let go.

My goal is deceptively simple and a daily struggle: Choose my priorities first, that is order my loves, and only then determine my spending. Some days are more successful than others. The question that Jesus presents to us in this stewardship season is not how many dollars we give, but how we order our loves. What are our priorities, and do our actions reflect those priorities?

Next Sunday, I will commit a full ten percent of my gross annual income to the work of this parish church in the year ahead. I will figure out the rest of my budget later. I began this practice years ago with a sense of obligation, but I continue it now with a sense of privilege. Soon, I will have lived in Memphis longer than anywhere else since my college days. In a way that no other place has been in my adulthood, Memphis is *my* city, and Holy Communion is *my* church. I believe in us, and it is my privilege to be a part of what God is about to do in the year ahead.

St. Augustine goes on to say that the process of ordering our loves is the process of defining what it means to live well. Living well does not mean living in luxury. Living well means living into our freedom. Living well means living generously. Living well means participating in the work that God is doing to make the world a better and more kingdom-like place.

I love you. I love the transformation that we are seeing in ourselves and in our community. I love that our flourishing is poised to continue for a long time to come. These loves are among the highest on my list, and I am going to make sure that my giving reflects their ranking.

Jesus came that he might be our ransom. As a result, we are free to order our loves in ways that differ from the way our society orders its loves. We are free to stop competing with each other and with the world's expectations of us. We are free to leave behind the cities of this world and to dwell in the Kingdom of God.

Amen.