

COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION?

Mark 10:35-45
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Corona del Mar Community Church Congregational

Several years ago, Sojourners magazine produced a great bumper sticker... “God Is Not a Republican... or a Democrat.” This bumper sticker came out as a much-needed reminder to us religious folks that our political preferences may have nothing whatsoever to do with God’s preferences. In the Bible belt where I just was last week for a faith formation conference, I sit left of center in most religious conversations. But here on the West Coast, I talk about Jesus far too much for my liberal, way left-of-center friends. For them, I’m a centrist, or even right of center. Then, I get frustrated, because I want them to see me as incredibly accepting, inclusive, even liberal. I want to be seated on the left. On the other hand, I have a clergy girlfriend in Michigan who’s proud of her right-wing leanings. She’s been very active most of her ministry in conservative politics and religion; even so, her conservative colleagues consider her way too liberal because she’s Facebook friends with people like me and even some of her unchurched friends. She’s even encouraged each of the church’s she’s served to study scripture and homosexuality, to help her parishioners decide for themselves where they stand on that conversation about inclusion or exclusion. For some reasons, her conservative colleagues think that means she’s not conservative enough. She wants to be seated on the right, but others consider her far too much in the center or even left of center. “Wishy washy,” they call her.

It’s all too easy to get caught up on labels, worrying about whose seated where and who gets to be first or last. This is not a new problem. Even James & John, two of Jesus’ most faithful disciples, get caught up in this idea of left, right, in, out, and labels when they ask Jesus for the two seats of honor when he comes into his glory. I don’t know if they’re talking about heavenly glory, or if they’re still thinking Jesus might be the kind of Messiah who will rule Israel in earthly glory. But either way, when they ask that favor, they’ve lost sight of everything Jesus has been trying to

teach them – just as Gloria and I do when we worry about whether our colleagues think of us as left, right, or center.

As followers of Jesus, we are called, not into seats of honor, but into a community of collaboration and care for all. And that type of community begins not with seats of honor, but with positions of service--the kind of service that means putting others first, even to the point of sacrificing not only positions of honor, but any positions at all. This kind of service means setting aside labels and taking up the only label that Jesus calls us to: loving service. That's the cross we have to bear.

Service like this is not the norm in our world today. Even politicians who used to be known as public servants seldom pull out the service language to talk about their work and purpose in the world. I read through the many flyers in my mail this weekend, and only saw one mention of serving the community. Yet, service is at the heart of the gospel, at the center of all that Jesus teaches, at the center of what it means to follow the Way of Jesus. To serve first, to serve God and others, and to serve lovingly and selflessly defines us, sets us apart from a world that focuses more on self-interest and self-gain. But in setting us apart, service also creates in us a community of love, a community of collaboration, a community of sisters and brothers serving alongside each other, serving together, serving one another, and serving God and God's world.

When James and John started arguing about who would be seated where, they lost sight of the journey of faith and discipleship they were traveling with Jesus. If Jesus had granted them such status, it could have destroyed the very community they had been building. Instead, Jesus reminded them of all they were called to be and to do.

When we get caught up in those same types of labels and mud-slinging and side-taking, we risk the very same thing. When we start worrying about whether people with different opinions or a different version of faith are right or wrong, we start losing sight of our own call to service. In

demanding that some are right or left, good or bad, some deserving of seats of honor and others deserving of only the footstool, we begin destroying the very community we are building. When we focus on how high we can climb or how we can guarantee the best seat or our first choice or our preferred outcome, we lose sight of the center of our purpose: to serve with love. That's the path James & John were headed down when they started debating about special seating arrangements.

When James and John focused on seating arrangements, their fellow disciples felt slighted and angry. When we focus on getting our own way, we set ourselves up as adversaries instead of friends. When James and John insisted on an answer from Jesus, they set themselves up as Jesus' masters instead of Jesus' disciples. When we insist on our opinions being God's opinions or our viewpoint being the only viewpoint, we set ourselves up as Masters instead of Servants. We start to sound an awful lot like James and John, and we can easily start destroying the community we most need.

But Jesus has a response for us, when this happens. Servanthood is the answer. Serving others changes us. Jesus offers the vivid reminder to James and John that servanthood is the answer. Even about himself, Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve." If our Master came to serve, so we also are called to serve, not to be served. We are called to center our lives on service, not on being right or accusing others of being wrong. But rather to serve others, wherever they are seated. Service transforms us. Loving service brings us every closer to God. Loving service brings us ever closer to one another. Loving service brings us closer to the best versions of ourselves. Service transforms us into the amazing people we are created to be.

Last night, I had the honor of hearing from dozens of people about the impact of Latino Health Access in their lives. Many of the people who are initially helped by this Santa Ana community organization eventually become volunteers and staff members to help their community. When Dorothy first told me about this organization, I assumed it was full of important doctors and

nurses and medical professionals who were proudly bringing medical answers and solutions to Santa Ana. But I was wrong. It's a community of people, most of whom live right there in the neighborhood, creating a community of support and advocacy and service with and for one another. At the heart of the organization are their prometeo's, who visit the neighborhoods, knock on doors, and initiate conversations with residents who might need help. They don't wait for someone to come to them. They don't purport to have all the answers. They walk the busy streets even on the hottest days of summer, visit the dangerous neighborhoods, and talk with the families of their community – listening for what the needs are and then offering resources and developing programs to address those needs. Letting solutions rise up from the community, and creating community and collaboration in the process. Not always easy work. Sometimes even dirty work. True service.

Last week, I visited a church in nearby Garden Grove and encountered a woman washing her dishes in the bathroom sink. She seemed perfectly comfortable, and I assumed she was one of their preschool teachers. After she left, the office manager explained that she's a woman who frequents their office as a break from her life of living in a nearby park. The office staff and volunteers welcome her openly and kindly. This is one small safe space in her life, probably not easy to find in her circumstances. And some days, she's not the easiest the person to be around. Sometimes she doesn't clean up the sink. And yet, they welcome her. Dirty work. True service.

My friend Rosalie and her husband left their lovely retirement home in Sante Fe a decade ago to relocate to Seattle to help their daughter and son-in-law with childcare when they travel for their work. Rosalie's children both work with the United Nations, and Rosalie and Tom felt called to support that work by becoming grandparent-caregivers to their daughter and her family. Seldom in their retirement years do Tom and Rosalie find their way onto a golf course or wonder what to do with their day. More often, they're trying to juggle carpool plans for their busy grandchildren or figure out Google searches as they help them with homework. Dirty work. True service.

These are stories of people who are not asking to sit at Jesus' left or right hand. These are not people who are arguing about whether others are too far to the left or too far to the right. I suspect if you surveyed these folks, you would find a wide variety of political and theological leanings. And yet, one thing connects all of them... loving service. Caring, compassionate concern for our brothers and sisters on this earth is the attitude that brings us back to exactly where we belong... sitting at Jesus feet, in humble service and quiet acts of kindness. Sitting at Jesus' feet puts us smack dab in the center, and it puts God smack dab in the center of our hearts and our lives. Sitting at Jesus' feet connects us together as a community of servants in service, collaborating to serve where we are called individually and as a community. When we are centering our lives and actions on the teachings of Jesus, when we are centering our hearts on God, we naturally respond as servants. Stewardship of our time and our actions, our talents and our gifts, flows naturally, for we are simply responding to the centering truth that God loves us so much that God trusts us to love others. And God's love can flow freely through us when we are centered on this truth, when we are seated at Jesus' feet. Left in your politics? Right in your religion? I don't care. Center on God, focus on service, and all will be well.