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Pentecost 24B
Peace, Seattle
October 18, 2009 epk
Isaiah 53, Mark 10

SERVANT – LEADER

When the afternoon bell rang at Lincoln-McKinley Elementary School in Havre, Montana, there were several walking routes home I could choose from; but not all of them were safe. As a second grader, I had learned to avoid certain streets, because if I didn't I might run into Huey and Luey, the neighborhood bullies.

Huey and Luey were brothers, and I'd seen them go to work on other kids, blocking their way, threatening and intimidating them, then chasing after them. It was enough to keep me as far from them as possible.

Well one day I took the shortcut through the park, and low and behold, when I reached the other side, there were Huey and Luey. I tried to make myself invisible, but it didn't work.

HEY! they shouted. I picked up my pace, pretending not to hear.

HEY YOU! They crossed the street and came toward me. I was trapped.

Then I heard someone call my name.
ER-IK! [sing song] Erik Kindem! Is that you?

It was Gladys, a friend of our family whose home I had been to many times.
We all turned and saw her standing on her porch, across the street.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO COME FOR A VISIT?—I HAVE SOME WARM CIDER TODAY.
What timing! A sigh of relief, and I scurried across the street to safety.

We could probably all share examples of being on the short end of the power stick in one struggle or another, whether as children on the playground or as adults in our professional lives.

And maybe the reverse is also true: at times in our lives we've experienced the power of another as protection, or we've used our position to advocate or protect or benefit someone else.

The central issue in today's Gospel lesson is power, and the question is:
How is it to be exercised?

Three times in the middle chapters of Mark's gospel Jesus predicts his own suffering, death and rising, and three times his closest followers, the ones he'd hand-picked for the job, fail to grasp what he is saying.

The final prediction comes in the verses just before today's gospel lesson. What awaits him in Jerusalem, he tells them, is humiliation and death.

These words are still hanging in the air, hovering there like your breath on a cold October morning, when the Zebedee brothers decide that now is a good time to pop the question they've been sitting on.

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TEACHER, they say, (using the technique of children everywhere who want parental commitment to YES before they even enunciate the question), WE WANT YOU TO GIVE US WHATEVER WE ASK, AND WHAT WE'D LIKE IS...CABINET LEVEL POSITIONS IN YOUR COMING ADMINISTRATION—WHAT DO YOU SAY?

YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE ASKING, he tells them.
ARE YOU ABLE TO DRINK THE CUP THAT I DRINK?
TO BE BAPTIZED WITH THE BAPTISM THAT I AM BAPTIZED WITH?

NO PROBLEM, they tell him, blithely unaware of the magnitude of what they've just said.

When the rest of the gang gets wind of the conversation, of course, another argument starts. Last time it was about who was the greatest. This time James and John are upbraided by the other disciples for their pre-emptive claim.

Jesus might have just hung his head in frustration, but instead he uses the occasion to draw them all into a deeper conversation about the meaning and power of servanthood.

He points to the top-down pyramid of power-brokering in the Roman world, and he says **NO. That's not our way.** He points to the hierarchy of relationships; the tactics of violence and says **that's not who we are**.

WHOEVER WANTS TO BE GREAT MUST BE SERVANT. WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE SLAVE. FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE AS A RANSOM FOR MANY.

It's a claim that sounds as oddly out of touch with our 21st century ears as it did to their 1st century ears, and one which we, like they, keep needing to learn over and over again.

Martin Copenhaver tells the story of one New England congregation he served as pastor.[1]

Some of the older members there could remember a time when wealthy families would send their servants to help cook church suppers alongside those who did not have servants to send. By the time Martin came to the church these stories were repeated with some amusement, but similar confusions continued.

According to the bylaws of the church the deacons were charged with spiritual leadership of the congregation. At one of the deacons meetings, someone complained that instead of being true to this high and momentous charge, deacons spent too much of their time delivering food to the homeless shelter and washing dishes after communion.

How could they tend to important spiritual matters when they were occupied with such mundane tasks? "I feel like a glorified butler," one of the deacons complained.

So together they looked at the Book of Acts, where the word "deacon" first appears. There they discovered that the apostles commissioned the first deacons so that there would be someone to take food to the widows!

[1] See his article, *Jockeying for Position* in *The Christian Century*, October 5, 1994.

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They were indeed butlers, charged with the mundane task of delivering food, and also glorified because that simple act was an important expression of Christ's self-giving love.

"In this realm," writes Copenhaver, "everything is turned upside down, and many of our usual assumptions begin to shake loose. To lead is to be a servant. The place of greatest honor is not at the head table but in the kitchen. The greatest reward is not a gold watch but a dish towel."

Today is a special day in the life of the Kay family and our congregation as Brennan enters the waters of baptism and becomes one with us in the body of Christ.

At 4 ½ months, Brennan is too young to be able to remember this day, and so part of our role as parents and sponsors and elder brothers and sisters in the family of God, is to re-member the story for him.

But more than that, it is our duty and our joy to teach Brennan what it means to be a servant, to come alongside his Sarah and Kevin and show him as he grows, how we who have waded into God's watery world of promise apply our personal power, talents, and selves, toward the fulfillment of God's purposes. It is our duty and our joy to show Brennan what servanthood looks like and how power is rightfully exercised in the manner of Jesus.

There are so many ways to speak about what God does in this sacrament.
Brother Martin spoke of baptism as a "daily drowning" and rising; a perpetual cycle of orienting our lives toward God's priorities and purposes. The mark that Brennan received today will be an indelible sign of that daily rhythm of dying and rising.

When things go well for him, we will remind him from whence all good gifts come.
When life challenges him, we will remind him that he is companioned on the journey by none other than the risen Christ.

And when he picks up on life's pecking order, we will do best if we keep pointing him to Jesus, who has shown the world decisively how power is to be used: To serve, to redeem, to heal, to transform the fragments of broken lives into a whole new world.

The prophet Isaiah declared:
WE ALL WERE LIKE SHEEP, HEADING OFF TO OUR OWN LITTLE DESTINATIONS, WHEN GOD LAID ON HIS SERVANT THE GUILT OF THE WHOLE WORLD. UPON HIM WAS THE PUNISHMENT THAT MADE US WHOLE, AND BY HIS BRUISES WE ARE HEALED.

In the final analysis, Jesus is more than an example for us to emulate—he himself is the ransom.
The bonds that hold captive the human race will not be loosed by an example.
We require deliverance. We need to be ransomed.[2] Christ is the one who accomplished that demanding task. And baptism is a sign and seal of this reality.

This is the "baptism" to which Jesus refers in our gospel text. Not an anointing to a higher office, as James and John supposed, but a way of self emptying that dares to trust in God's ultimate deliverance.
Amen.

[2] Donald Juel, *Augsburg Commentary on Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg)