

Sermon for Sunday, October 21, 2018 - "Love Is the Goal"

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

"We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you," James and John tell Jesus. They sound like entitled kids from some bad, made for TV movie - "C'mon, just give us whatever we want. C'mon, puh-lease. C'mon, just say yes."

The context makes it even worse. Jesus has just told his disciples that he will be mocked, spit upon, flogged and killed. You'd think they'd maybe show a little empathy - say something like, "Wow that's tough, anything we can do to help? or even, tell us more." No, James and John decide, "This is the perfect time to make our demands. Seize the moment when his defenses are down."

So, they step forward, they get up in Jesus' face and say, "We want you to do whatever we want" - bad form guys, really bad.

Jesus could have just given them an icy stare and shut them up. He could have turned and walked in the other direction. Instead, he engages them. He asks them the question he uses with people who come to him for healing, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

"What is it you want me to do for you?" Imagine if Jesus looked at you and asked you that question.

I would have a lot to say. I would have a pretty long list. I want to see my preferred candidates win on election day. I want congress to do very specific things. I tell my representatives these things regularly, but maybe God could get through? I'd like help with my arthritis and my sister's health. I want my kids to be happy. I want to see the US pay more attention to the new UN climate change report. I could go on and on. There is a lot that I'd really like God to do, and now. I'm guessing you'd have a long list too.

I like to think my requests are more noble than what James and John ask of Jesus: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." That request is just too much - it's so over the top and grandiose. And yet it is also too small, too petty. And maybe, honestly, so are my requests. I want my party to win and my needs to be met and my views to prevail and my preferred outcomes to happen. All this keeps me fairly narrowly focused on myself.

Jesus, on the other hand, let go of his own power and privilege in order to serve others. He gave himself in love for the whole world - even the people I don't like. He is focused on changing us all through love.

Jesus calls us to follow in this way of love.

He wants us to know the greatness that comes when we stop focusing so much on our own agenda, no matter how noble, and instead focus on giving ourselves in love for others. I think this call of Jesus pertains even to our political lives, maybe especially to our political lives. We need to focus on loving others.

That is not to say that we should just try to be nice and say, "Can't we all just get along." Often love requires speaking hard truths and challenging others. We need to advocate and vote and be politically active with strength and conviction and courage. Yet Jesus calls us to do this with love for others, especially those we find it easy to despise. Jesus calls us to do this with a sense of humility.

It seems we need to keep a larger goal in mind. The ultimate goal is not the advancement of one party or the other, one particular policy or another - all of that is too narrow. Love is the ultimate goal. The goal is for all people to know they are loved and to live with love for one another. That must come before, above every other agenda, no matter how noble. That larger goal must inform all the ways we work in the political sphere.

To follow in this way of love and keep focused on this larger goal, we need to be transformed.

We need to know, deep in our bones, that we are loved always and forever. We need to drink the cup Jesus drinks - that is, undergo a kind of death. Our small, petty, ego-driven selves need to die. And we need to share in Jesus' baptism - that is death and new life.

We need to be transformed. And this is what Jesus does for us. Jesus engages us as he did James and John. Jesus shows up here today in word and sacrament to love and serve you and each one of us.

Jesus listens to all our requests, whether they be petty or noble, and receives them with compassion.

Jesus convicts us of our narrow vision and pushes us beyond ourselves into God's larger purpose of love for all people.

Jesus also gives us the cup of his self-giving love and baptism in his name. Jesus works through both of these gifts to put to death our small selves and raise us up into new life again and again - a new life that is so much larger and more loving than anything we could achieve on our own.

Jesus gives himself in love for you today.
You are loved beyond measure.
May love be your guide.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

