

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 22, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 10:35-45

Now, I've already mentioned my sister at one devotion I did to the Men's Club, but I'll mention her to you. My sister has a confidence problem. She has too much of it! She has a self-esteem problem, too. Some of you who lack proper self-esteem, my sister got yours. I'm the oldest, and her nickname is Sissy, and I gave her that nickname, and that was the last decision that anyone has ever made for her. She is a Methodist minister's wife, and after living out of state for several years, she came back to an annual conference. She attended a ministers' wives meeting, and with a loud public question, she said, "Who used to be in charge here?" She actually did that.

James and John asked a question of Jesus one day. In real English, they asked, "Jesus, we want you to say yes to what we're about to ask you. Okay? Now here it is. In your glorious Kingdom, we want to sit at the places of honor right next to you, one at your right hand and one at your left. We would like to be large and in charge." Now, the Bible says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment."

In order to see ourselves realistically, we are to, in humility, receive the implanted word, it says in James, and then we must use that word as a mirror in order to see our true spiritual condition and change what needs changing, again from James. Scripture calls for sober judgment about our true selves and humility and change. Now, these attitudes can lead us to unity under Jesus Christ, consensus that God alone is good, and we have a long way to go.

Have you seen the political ads this season? I know you have. You can't avoid them. We even get ads from North Carolina and Georgia. We're getting them from all over the place. I wonder, is there such a thing as consensus in public debate anymore? Is there such a thing as unity anymore? Is there such a thing as people putting aside their egos and cooperating without name calling, without back biting, without seeking to undercut the goals of another? I actually fear that even if one party had a wonderful idea, there would be immediate opposition from the opposing party. Even if their own ideas came out of the mouths of the opposition, I think they would turn and oppose their own ideas! This is the attitude that I see.

The idea of finding a middle ground and a true consensus and unity of purpose is gone. Everyone has taken sides, and they refuse to see any honor or wisdom in the other side. There seems to be almost no middle ground. It concerns me in our nation, and it concerns me in our church. You know, nations are made up simply of people. If you believe the Biblical estimation of people, all people are sinners, every single one. That means when you vote in an election, you are always choosing the lesser of two evils because evil infects every single one of us. Selfishness and self will and the will to power over others infects every human being. Unity is of God, and we can truly be unified when we all see ourselves as fallen and fallible, redeemed by the grace of God,

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neither by anything we have done nor by anything we could do. God alone is good. God alone is Lord.

Jesus says here that lording over others, being a tyrant over others, he said that we as Christians are not to do this no matter how common it is in the world. We are not to act this way. Lording over others is deciding that you should get what you want because you want it and simply demanding that your will be done. Getting what you want or making others pay, that is lording over others. It is forbidden behavior for Christians. It is wrong in a government. It is wrong in a church. It is wrong in a marriage. It is wrong in a family. There must be recognition of the worth and the image of God, which exists even in the lowliest and even in the powerless among us. Lording over others demeans and devalues a person created in the image of God. It is a serious offense.

None of us have all the answers. None of us have all the wisdom. None of us can sit in God’s chair and pass judgment.

Changing gears a little, I’ve been talking to some folks, who are deep in this community, lately. Some are out at Wesley Commons, and there are some others. A long time ago, you may not know this, but churches were planted pretty much by the mills in each little community or each little mill village. Usually there was one Methodist and one Baptist, and the churches back then were to a large degree run by the mills. Now, that day is gone, and that’s a good thing. I’ve heard that some of those ideas infected Main Street, too, and years ago, one of the members of this church went to one of our bishops, and said, “Here’s a list of five preachers that we will accept.” He said this to the bishop. Imagine! The bishop, who appoints the ministers, being told how to do his job!

Now, we have a structure where ministers are appointed, not called, but appointed, and this list of five was highly out of order, and I am sure that it just came from years of just doing things that way, but it was not a good thing. In fact, it was an example of trying to lord over others, to get what you want because you want it, and forget structure, propriety and order. I guess if you are used to calling the shots in business, you tend to forget and try to do that everywhere, but that’s not how it works in a Christian church. That is not who we are. Also in our nation, our founding fathers knew well that we have a tendency to write our egos large over others and everyone else, and that’s why we have the checks and the balances in government. We hear that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That is merely an echo of what the founders knew from their knowledge of Scripture and from history. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We need checks. We need balances. We need order.

We want what we want because we want it, and if we don’t get it, we stamp our feet. That is still a reality of human nature. As we age, and we get more sophisticated, the ways that we stamp our feet change, but we don’t really change that much from age one to age 100 unless we allow ourselves to be humbled before God, God who loves us, and God who can change our hearts and make us new creatures, and make us able to serve instead of demand to be served.

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God can give us a new vision for unity under God’s grace, under God’s forgiveness, but with the full realization that we, too, all of us, need God’s grace and forgiveness. We do not have the wherewithal, and we do not have the wisdom to pretend to lord over others. Now, we can introduce others to God, and that is what we are called to do, and God has some boundaries that are very well defined. Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. From the Old Testament down to Jesus’ teachings, that word is constant. There is humility in that, and there is a connectedness in that. There is one Lord, and that is the God of Abraham and Jacob and Isaac, and the Lord that we know through Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all, and we, we are forgiven sinners.

Humility is our place, and service is our call. When we lead, we lead under God, under Christ. We are not lord over anyone. We can’t stamp our feet, withhold our money, take our ball and run home. We who follow Christ as Lord follow His rules, and we love God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and love neighbor as self. We respect our neighbor. We tell no lies. We pass no judgments. We must never carry the worldly tendency of lording over others into the church or into our marriages or into our families. The true mark of wisdom as a Christian is humility. The true mark of wisdom as a Christian is humility. Knowing God and knowing your own heart as God has revealed it to you will lead you to humility.

You know, your nearest neighbor is your husband or your wife or your parents or your brothers or your sisters. In these relationships, too, we are to work for unity and peace. This is our calling. This is our calling. One who says my will be done instead of God’s will be done has not learned humility, but has made himself or herself a little god. After resting in God’s arms as a humble, forgiven sinner, we dare not go back and forget, go back to my will be done. You know why? Because we can’t trust our own will. None of us can. Apart from God, we cannot trust that what we want or what we want from others is good or right.

Proverbs 3 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. Do not be wise in your eyes.” Power of money, power of opinions, and discounting others without listening to them – one brick at a time – we destroy relationships when we lord over others.

As I’ve said before, I believe that God is in our midst. Where two or more are gathered in God’s name, there God is in our midst, that’s in the middle. If we don’t seek the middle ground where God is, then we are seeking to lord our will over others. If we don’t seek the middle ground where God is, then we are placing ourselves where God belongs. We are lording over others.

I’m not saying that there are not times when people are factually right or factually wrong. What I’m saying is the way that we speak and relate to others must be in humility. I’m beginning to learn that being factually right is not enough. If I come across as arrogant,

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even if I’m right, I’m wrong. You can do the right thing the wrong way. My wife, Caroline, has been telling me that for sometime now. You can say the right thing the wrong way. I’m learning it.

We are fellow travelers on this journey from birth to death and eternity. This mysterious journey where no one knows all the answers, but we each can know the creator God, and His answer is I love you, I forgive you, your sinfulness and your arrogance, I love you. Now, go forth. God says I have served you on the cross. I have shown you how terrible is the end of the arrogance of power. I have shown that clearly enough on the cross. As you go forth in my name, you dare not become arrogant with whatever power you possess over whomever. You dare not lord over others. The Son of man came to serve, not to be served, and I send you forth to serve, not to be served.

When we define ourselves in any other way than a sinner saved by grace, we are trying to climb up above and look down on somebody. Why do we do that? It’s just another example of lording over others, looking down on others. For some people, that’s what life is about, to get higher and higher until you arrive, but arrive where? God came down among the lowest common denominator, the outcast, because the powerful already had their self-definition. They were not interested in Jesus. They already had their rewards, of course, when they die and go back to dust and rust and decay, everything they own is gone away so it’s silly then and it’s silly now.

We forget who Jesus was and how He came to condemn that entire frame of mind, that frame of mind we constantly are in danger of falling back into. He came down, all the way down to the bottom, as a servant, as one approachable by lepers and by prostitutes and by criminals. They approached Him as one who was as humble as he was. He did not condemn. He did not lord over them even though He was God in flesh. He did not lord over them. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to serve in His name especially to serve the powerless, the voiceless, the forgotten, and we can’t do that from on high.

I’m going to read a few verses as I close from Philippians, the second chapter, “Let each one of you look not only to his own interest but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but He emptied Himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” So when we get right with God, God always sends us out to get right with others. If you aren’t right with others, then it is time to go back to the beginning and get right with God. Love God and love your neighbor. There is no way to separate the two. Humility and seeking the middle ground under the lordship of Jesus Christ, this is where we should be. If we are not there now, I invite you to come to pray about it during the closing hymn. Amen.