

October 18, 2009
Lectionary 29b
Mark 10:35-45
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

GOT AMBITION?

You have to admit that James and John have it: ambition. They will do anything to get the best seats in the hereafter. They want to be right next to Jesus. They've been through assertive training. They clearly say what they need and what they want. Even if it comes with an edge.

A couple of years ago *Time* magazine ran a story on ambition. It raised the question whether the need to get ahead in life is hard-wired in all of us equally. It seems it's not. For every high-achiever there's someone content to accept what life brings. Why are some of us like James and John, wanting to grab a piece of the resource pie before someone else gets it?

One psychologist (Dean Simonton, University of California) who studies genius, creativity and eccentricity said that "ambition is energy and determination. But it calls for goals, too. People with goals but no energy are the ones who wind up sitting on the couch saying, 'One day I'm going to build a better mousetrap.'" People with energy but no clear goals aimlessly move from one project to another.

So is ambition a value that we want to instill in our children? Is it a trait that we want to hold up in our faith community?

From our gospel the problem seems to be that you can be overly ambitious. Stepping on others to get what you want. And you can have your priorities out of line. Concerned only for yourself and not for the good of all.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once preached a sermon on this text. He said that deep down within all of us is something he calls the "drum major instinct". We desire to be out front, to be first, to lead the parade. King says it begins with our first cry as a baby. We want attention. Children want life to give them first place. They are a little bundle of ego. Yet even as adults, King goes on, we are like James and John. We want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve recognition, to lead the parade.

When James and John ask Jesus for the best seats in the house, Jesus asks them if they know what they are asking. Just verses before this passage Jesus says for the third time that his path will involve suffering and death. Who wants talk like that? That's not the path to fame and fortune. You can see how it would go in one ear and out the other.

Jesus seems to be saying: you want to live a life that makes a difference? Follow me. But the path will involve suffering, sacrifice and service. The cup will not only be blessing, but suffering. The waters of baptism mean not only welcome, but dying to self.

Suffering, sacrifice and service. Giving our lives for something greater than ourselves. Can we think of our life ambition in those terms? Can we instill these values in our children? Can we as a community commit ourselves to this radical call to live simply? To not get on the escalator of upward mobility, always needing more, making more, demanding more. Instead, finding joy through giving, serving and letting go?

Regardless of our age, some of us are still wondering what we will be when we grow up. How we will use our God-given gifts in service to others, to the earth, to God. One of my favorite quotes about vocation is by Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Sometimes the problem is that we're bored. Without passion. Without purpose. Without ambition. Most of us want to be safe, polite, obedient and comfortable. But William Sloane Coffin says that that's not the same as being alive. If you back off from every little controversy in the world, you're not alive. He says that one of his greatest pleasures was being with black civil rights leaders in the 1960's because they were so alive, cheerful and courageous. But it's this line by Coffin that is most thought-provoking to me: "You can be more alive in pain than in complacency."

It's true that the pain of the world can be overwhelming. Whether in Afghanistan or the Southside of Chicago. Whether the friend diagnosed with cancer or the beggar at the el stop. Whether the neighbor who still can't find work or the family member struggling with depression.

Jesus continues to enter those places of pain and loss. At this table bread is broken and wine is poured out. Into our world of suffering Christ comes. Bearing our infirmities and carrying our sorrows. Sharing our tears and our hopes.

And we find that our energy of ambition is transformed to the simple yet profound call to serve. And to be in solidarity with our suffering world.

No question. It can be overwhelming to read the news. Fran Peavey is a social change worker. She writes of putting down the newspaper she finished reading one day, closing her eyes, and dreaming that she is holding the round globe in her arms, like a baby. This is my home planet, she tells herself.

As she touches different places on the globe the troubles of each location flash into her mind. She wishes she could give relief for the wrinkles of pain in each land, river and ocean. She holds the globe to her breast and sobs. Her fingers curl around thousands of miles, thousands of weapons, thousands of birds and fish, thousands of people longing for peace. There is no way to invent a way out of the suffering, she writes. It must be lived and loved for now in the real. She rocks the globe, patting it softly, and singing to the globe--to the earth--a lullaby her grandmother taught her. (Fran Peavy, in *By Life's Grace*)

I don't know if you'd call it ambition. But I suspect as she sang that lullaby to our suffering world, she was as fully alive as she ever was.