



“True Identity”

Text: Mark 10:32-45

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

“Well, it’s been a quiet week in Evansville, Indiana, my hometown.” We made the national news this week when a racist customer at the Olive Garden on Green River Road requested a white server in place of the server assigned to her table. The former manager made the requested change and was out of a job. The customer has not been identified. As if that would make a difference. Suffice it to say that racism is more alive and well in Evansville - our fair city - than any of us would like to admit. “E’ is not for “everyone.” Not by a long shot.

There were more shootings in Evansville this week. Police responded to a number of gun-related incidents across the city - incidents that included armed robbery, intimidation with a gun, threatening with a gun, drive-by shootings, and - most disturbing in some ways - juveniles involved in gun-related incidents. Many of our Evansville neighborhoods are unsafe, maybe not the ones in which you and I live, but far too many people in Evansville cannot be sure that gunfire won’t be part of the events of their evening.

Many in Evansville, at least by the look of my Facebook newsfeed, have been disheartened and disenchanted that there will be no woman candidate for consideration in this year’s presidential election. As the husband of a brilliant woman and as a father of three young equally intelligent young women, and as someone whose eyes have been opened for a long time to the inherent sexism of our systems - including the church - it is more than disconcerting to realize that I have been lying to my children for their entire lives, telling them that they can be anything they want to be. It is simply not so. They can be anything they want to be as long as it is approved by old, white men.

Now, I could go on, but it's bad enough that I've given you that sermon introduction when you are already one hour behind on your sleep. But, these three things all have a common thread running through them. That common thread is power - and in particular - male power. Our culture has been saturated by the use and abuse of male power. It finds expression in racism, violence, and sexism, to name only a few. It denies power to others and denigrates whoever gets in the way.

And lest you think that this is a new development, let me take you into our story from Mark's gospel.

Jesus and the disciples are on the road to Jerusalem - a path they have been following since Jesus' transfiguration. Jesus is not keeping the disciples in the dark. He has told them - again and again - why they are going to Jerusalem. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him...". The disciples are not uninformed about what is to happen when they arrive at the end of the journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus is to be the victim of unbridled male power - male hegemony is a more technical term. A group of men will make decisions for all. They will assert their power and wield it as they please. They will raise up those they will raise up and they will cut down those they will cut down - Jesus among them. It was an unquestioned power and everyone was aware of it.

James and John - bless their hearts - have been paying attention. They know Jesus and they know he doesn't lie or mislead. If Jesus is going to be taken from them by the powers of the day, Jesus needs to have a succession plan in place. And, don't you know, they are volunteering for that position themselves. "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you...grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left..." "Let us be the one who 'rule over' this thing you've started." "Let us have power in the Empire of God." James and John are executing nothing short of a power grab.

Jesus responds by telling them, "you don't know what you are talking about." Jesus rebukes them - cuts them down to size - for their complete lack of understanding. They have been with Jesus all this time and haven't learned a thing.

Jesus lays it out clearly and without comfort. "Can you take on the suffering I must endure? Can you face the rejection, the repudiation, and the renunciation I will face? Will you take the kick-in-the-teeth that I will take?"

James and John, and Jesus are not communicating. They are speaking past each other. James and John think that the Empire of God is not different from the Empire of Caesar. James and John think it is about the use and abuse of power. They think that, just like in the Empire of Caesar, the leaders of the Empire of God will wield enormous power and influence and they want in on that.

Jesus rejects the basis of their request.

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Power - as experienced in the Empire of Caesar - with all its trappings and with all its benefits - has no place in the Empire of God. Making decisions on behalf of another - taking their power of deciding for themselves away - making decisions that will improve your own "bottom line" - exercising power for the simple pleasure of exercising power - none of this has a place in the Empire of God. Forget it! It's as out of place as a piano in an outhouse!

The way of Jesus - the way of the Empire of God - is service and care. The way of Jesus - the way of the Empire of God - is encouragement and advocacy. The way of Jesus - the way of the Empire of God - is compassion and tenderness. Jesus makes it crystal-clear: Power, in the Empire of God, is never used for self, but for others. It is never exploited for the sake of exploitation, but for the sake of benefitting the most overlooked and ignored. Power, in the Empire of God is never to be amassed, but is always to be used to better the lives of all. It is never to be used for personal advantage, but always used to do the work of justice and righteousness.

And as if all that were not enough, Jesus caps the whole conversation with the words:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

In the midst of a tradition of all-powerful, manly, imperializing, divinely appointed and commissioned male leadership, Jesus rejects that power-system and, instead, claims for himself the role of servant. Jesus identifies with those who had no power - slaves - rather than be seen as an emperor, a potentate, or a power-broker.

Since Jesus calls his disciples - of every age - to be the servant and slave of all - we are called to lives of service and sacrifice, instead of lives of amassing power and being served. We are called to serve all people - especially those who have been battered and scarred by the abuse of the world's power. We are called to be servants of those who suffer bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination. We are called to be the slaves of those who can see no way to live except through violence and who can only feel powerful when they point a gun at another human being. We are

called to be servants of women who are mistreated simply because of their gender and denied a well-deserved place in leadership and authority, not to mention the simple respect due another created in the image of God.

The Church has not always been faithful to this calling. The Church has amassed more than its fair share of power. Leaders within the Church continue to do this as they live in massive mansions, have fleets of cars, private jets, and expect the treasures of heaven - through the treasures of their followers - to fill their lives to overflowing, while failing to make any significant change to the world at all. They want their pictures taken with the powerful, but don't want to immerse themselves in the needs of the poor, the marginalized, and the victims of injustice.

And, lest we condemn only those members of the Christian family who are most egregious in that behavior, let us confess that we, too, have built power bases, amassed fortunes, and kept unholy silence in the face of the situation of those swallowed by prejudice, poverty, sexism, and more forms of phobias than we could ever hope to number. Our hands are not clean. We have not been servants, but those expecting to be served.

Our true identity is not to be found in being fixtures in the halls of power. Our true identity is not to be found in accumulating influence and riches and a place in the poisoned-power structures of the world. Our true identity will never be found in awards, proclamations, or the seats of honor the world offers us if we will merely "play ball."

Our true identity is in embracing our call to be the servant disciples of the Servant Savior. Our true identity is found in lives of self-sacrificing service and outrageous unselfishness. Our true identity is that of being servants of the Servant of God.

And when we embrace that identity, life finds its fullness and purpose and meaning.

It's just that simple.

Who are we? Really. Who are we?

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all."

It's still true. And will be. For now and evermore. Amen.



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