

## **Suffer Club**

Mark 10:35-45

Isaiah 53:4-12

### **Slide: Diva**

I'm a soprano. For those of you who aren't sure what a soprano is, it's the top of the singing range; that is, a soprano is usually the one who can sing the highest notes. In a choir, there are four major voice types: bass, tenor, alto and soprano, soprano being the highest. And, let me tell you, I can sing the highest.

In fact, any note you can sing, I can sing higher. I can sing anything higher than you. As a soprano, I can display the greatest attitude of being a DIVA or PRIMA DONNA as anybody. In fact, the joke usually goes: How many sopranos does it take to screw in a light bulb? And the answer is one – one soprano to put in the light bulb while the world revolves around her.

**Slide: What do you want...**

But, enough about me! Except that as an example, in today's Gospel, we can get easily caught up in the one-upmanship that it seems James and John are trying to get away with – jockeying for position to be next to Jesus when Jesus comes to his glory. They are obviously the sopranos of their day trying to get the highest place of honor. Who really could blame them? Don't we all want a particular place of honor with the God that we adore, the one who created us and loves us? We might not want to admit it, but our desire to be noticed is always there. It's always nice to get an invitation to the party.

Oftentimes, when hearing this story of James and John requesting a special place, we can get easily caught up into thinking that this story of the disciples is all about how not to be like them and how instead to be like a servant and what that looks like for us. Sure, we could go there. That's the easy thing. Don't be like them. Put yourself last. Serve people. The End!

But, this Gospel text for today is about much more than humility. Along the way, Jesus has been trying to teach them HOW to be a follower not of an empire, or of a glorious conquest, or even of an earthly glory, but rather the path of suffering. The glory of Christ is through suffering. If we listen and pay attention to the Gospel of Mark all the way to this point, Jesus is on a journey only to one thing – his humiliation, his torture, and his death. Not so glorious. Is it any wonder the disciples don't get it despite Jesus' hints along the journey?

**Slide: "Duh"sciples**

Up until this point, we have been seeing our friends the disciples looking not so great. A chapter ago, Peter, James and John go up a mountain with Jesus where Jesus is transfigured before them while talking to Moses and Elijah, but the disciples don't understand it and instead ask if they should pitch tents for them all to stay in. They don't know what to say and rightly so.

Then, these same disciples argue with each other on who is the greatest of them all - which by the way is before today's asking of James and John. Clearly, they didn't learn the lesson the first time when Jesus instructs them that those who follow him should carry their cross, and put themselves last, for the last shall be first and the first shall be last. To give an example of this, he puts a child in front of them to show that they should be this way, vulnerable, humble, the least of these.

Jesus then goes on to tell them that his whole purpose of becoming human is to draw all people to himself, to suffer, die, then be raised again. He told them this not once, not twice but on three separate occasions; and none of them understand that he means what he says. It's like they don't want to hear it. They have their own ideas of what glory looks like and it doesn't look like that. Why would anyone want to suffer to achieve glory? It simply seems ludicrous, even today.

Then, in today's reading, James and John ask Jesus for whatever they want. Basically, they are asking to sit on each side of Jesus as the honored advisers that the kings and rulers of that day practiced. They are hoping for that prestigious honor. Of course, all that does is make the other disciples angry, not to mention continuing to show that they still don't understand what it is they are asking.

For, the glory of Jesus' kingdom is through suffering, suffering on a cross. The cross is the only throne Jesus sits upon and the only ones who sit on his left and right are the two thieves who are crucified alongside him. To them belong that honor. It's clear that the way of Jesus is the cross, but it's also clear that his disciples want none of that.

**Slide: The Pieta**

You know, I really struggle with the concept of suffering as you likely do. At root, the word suffering means enduring pain or distress, sustaining loss, being subject to disability or sickness, and

ultimately the process of dying. Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes for each of us. Daily nuisances may frustrate us. Repeated failures discourage us. Bills we cannot pay pressure us. A disintegrating relationship happens to us - Depression, violence, or illness...suffering occurs to everybody.

Whenever we think about suffering, we immediately jump to the "why" question. Why do we suffer? And, for that we have no good answers, none that can't be reduced to simple and inept platitudes anyway. But, we often forget asking the "how" - how do we suffer? Suffering is how things are.

We are going to have to suffer sometime and we know others do, so if we are going to suffer, HOW are we to be when it happens to us? How can we conceive a path through suffering in a way that Jesus does? We can ask why all we want, but the fact is that suffering is simply a part of being human. HOW do we choose to be within our

suffering and the suffering of others?

**Slide: Jesus the wounded...**

And, that is where we see the whole crux of today's reading, in fact that of the whole Gospel of Mark, that Jesus not only chooses to suffer for our sakes, but he enters into the center of human suffering, and because he has chosen to do this, he suffers when we do. The glory of God then is not glory that human beings desire, a kingdom of power that actively avoids suffering and in fact even creates it in its power, but rather we see a suffering servanthood, one where the cross takes center stage in all of human history. All of human history then: past, present and future streams directly to this central event God on a cross, whereupon the suffering of the entire world hangs.

**Slide: A Spring within us**

Theologian Richard Rohr put it this way in his devotional book called "A Spring within us":

*"I believe – if I am to believe Jesus – that God is suffering*

*love. If we are created in God's image, and if there is so much suffering in the world, then God must also be suffering. How else can we understand the revelation of the cross? Why else would the central Christian logo be a naked, bleeding, suffering divine-human being? Many of the happiest and most peaceful people I know love "a crucified God" who walks with crucified people, and thus reveals and redeems their plight as God's own. For them, Jesus is not observing human suffering from a distance; he is... at the center of it."*

Of course, our first instinct is to try to fix pain, control it, or even somewhat foolishly to understand it before we accept that it simply is there. That's why Jesus praises a certain quality in his disciples called *faith* – that trust and desire to follow in the way Jesus calls us into. This way of servanthood holds everything within a larger framework, where our private suffering then is not made center stage like the Prima Donna, or like James and John's vision, but rather shared with God and

with those who suffer alongside us. Call this the suffer club in a way.

**Slide: By His Wounds...**

This doesn't mean, however, that we seek suffering as a way of life, but rather that we look to see that Christ suffers for and alongside us when we do suffer. And, we suffer alongside others when they suffer. That's what wishing to be first among us means and what tasting the cup of glory that Jesus shares with us is - a cup that contains not a power of human glory, but a Holy Communion with the creator of all things.

*"But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole... and by his bruises, we are healed."*

Amen.