

The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland.  
Mark 10: 35-45 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

We are living in a time of transition when it comes to how we understand leadership. In the past, a leader was someone with power, someone – always a man – who sat at the top of the institutional flow chart and made decisions which those below him were expected to implement. He was the wise man, the experienced man, the powerful man, egotistical and often arrogant.

Our culture has encouraged such a view, admiring self-promotion, worshiping fame, valuing only winning and being “number one.” We’ve been taught to envy those who have power over others, or political control, or the most wealth and influence, or the highest rating in the polls, or the most exposure to the media. - and the list just goes on and on.

Our responses are varied, diverse: everything from seeking to maintain the status quo, to offering positive alternative models of institutions, to an institutional-ludditism that’s best epitomized by a famous Grover Norquist quote: “I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Sociologists will tell you that institutions serve a vital role in human community. Without them, without political structures, impartial laws, an independent judiciary, a neutral police force and military – without them things like the Holocaust happen.

Over the last 30 years it's become apparent that the way we as a culture view the authority we have granted to our cultural and governmental institutions has been, and continues, to change - and, in fact, it's not just our culture; this is a world-wide phenomenon. One author spelled out the nature of that change quite plainly in the title of his book: “The War Against Authority.” As he says in his introduction, there's a “cresting current challenging the legitimacy of practically all existing institutions of governance, be they the nation-state, the church, or the family.” You can see that war everywhere. The attacks are made in the name of autonomy, justice, equality, historical entitlement, and endless other convictions, ideologies, and claims.

In one sense, this war isn't new; what's different today is that modern communications methods like social media have simply made it much easier to create the powerful, amorphous coalitions that can effectively mount the sorts of attacks that we've seen over the last 20 years.

There are legitimate and illegitimate ways of prosecuting this war, and there are legitimate and illegitimate ways of responding to it. As so many scholars today are saying, the sharp concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, the decline of the middle class, and the increase in poverty are all directly traceable to attempts to block the egalitarian and democratic direction that legitimate challenges to institution and authority reflect.

It's in that context that both today's Epistle and Gospel start to make even more sense – they're identifying the nature of religious institutions then offering an alternate vision for them. How should authority should be exercised in community for people of faith? Might that be a broader societal model? That's certainly the New Testament Vision.

James and John's request isn't unusual, in fact culturally that request was natural, and, in fact, quite impressive - they were taking it for granted that Jesus *would* be reigning in glory some time soon - it would make no sense to ask for this honor if their future perspective ended at just

wandering around the countryside preaching and healing until they died of old age, would it? Or were threatened with death.

Jesus' reply was "real world" – "this is, in fact, what you can expect if you challenge the *status quo*, the institutions of Jewish nationhood and Roman empire" he said to them.

And then we get to the core of the passage - a vision of leadership that Jesus proposed should shape any community of which he and they were to be a part. Not 'top down,' not institutional in a way we would recognize.

That new community comes into being after Jesus' resurrection – or, rather, comes back into being. The Bible as a whole recounts the way humans fail at community, with the resultant exile, literally, spiritually, metaphorically, from God.

Both Jesus in the Gospel and the author of the passage in Isaiah say that community comes into being or back into being exactly the same way: through God's forgiveness. The return from Exile, and the Empty Tomb represent that restoration back into the beloved community.

This restored community continues to be defined by the experience of suffering and redemption, by the cross and empty tomb – it represents a continuity in history - it endures. We endure.

The core characteristic of this community is love, it's expression in the world is through servanthood.

This reality continues to be the greatest challenge we as Christians face: can we be that community of love and servanthood? Because over 2,000 years that community has evolved into an institution – the Church – whose hierarchical authority and rules-bound identity seem to contradict almost everything that Jesus says in today's gospel. We're not good at seeing leaders as servants, and leaders aren't good at being servants. I think the reason for that is, in part because we miss the most fundamental part of the equation: we're all servants. We serve each other.

To be part of a community is, by definition, to be known - to be willing to enter into relationship with openness and trust. To live any other way is to be alone in the crowd, to be lonely among friends, to be homeless under the roof of relatedness.

That sort of community isn't susceptible to the assaults institutions are experiencing because it places authority in its very midst. It is, in a very real way, a shared authority where each are delegated to fulfil the needs of the whole – as much as it's possible to do so – outside of a hierarchical or authoritarian structure; we are disciples of Jesus and servants of each other.

This way of living, this servanthood, this discipleship, isn't some sort of task-oriented subservience to some dominant overseer - it's about joining together as a community of equals - as friends bearing one another's burdens. We're called to live with compassion and kindness, grace and mercy, because they're the gifts that we have been given from God in Jesus, the gifts that can sustain us - and those with whom we share them - in the midst of brokenness and near despair.

And so in the midst of a war against authority in all its forms we can live in peace, and model an

alternative to that war – we can, at least, if we can embrace the common servanthood of Jesus.

The challenge for us in life is to set aside that very human wish for prominence and place, for power and authority, and, instead, to embrace that place and a vision where we find our true worth by entering into Christian community and into the relationships that underpin it - relationships with God, with each other, and with the work we are called to do, in the knowledge that in making this journey together we are sharing in the burdens of living **and** we are sharing in its joys as well. Amen.

