

“The Cross-Shaped Life”

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Mark 10:35-45

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” Mark 10: 45 -847).

Elongated coins are coins that have been flattened or stretched and stamped with a new design with the purpose of creating a commemorative or souvenir token. We see these “penny squishing machines” as they are affectionately known especially at zoos, museums, and theme parks. If you are like me you have made a few of these souvenirs over the years. The process of creating elongated coins is legal in the United States, almost all parts of Japan, South Africa and parts of Europe provided that the mutilated coins are not used fraudulently. Because elongated coins are made mainly as souvenirs, mutilation for this purpose is legal (Wikipedia, “Elongated Coin”).

I am not quite sure what makes these “penny squishing machines” popular. Perhaps its users enjoy a cheap souvenir. Perhaps they like to collect all the different designs that a particular machine offers. Perhaps they are fascinated by the “squishing” process and want to see their coin squished.

Regardless of the reasons for one’s fascination with elongated coins and its process, it is interesting to observe that what these machines are in essence doing is stamping one image over another. In a sense, one image is replacing another. That new image becomes the dominant image. In a matter of seconds the old shape and image of the coin is gone and a new shape and image emerges. That new image gives the coin a new identity and renewed purpose. Rather than being used as currency the particular penny is now primarily used as a souvenir or a collector’s item. The new image dictates its purpose.

In our Gospel reading we catch a glimpse of the image and identity of two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. We learn something about how they viewed themselves and their identities from their conversation with Jesus. They appear to see themselves primarily as lords and masters to be served rather than servants who serve and care for others in love and humility.

They come to Jesus and approach him with the following demand, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (Mk 10:35). They put themselves in a position above Jesus. They come with requests and demands, expecting Jesus to meet them. They approach Jesus as a master would a slave or servant. They rattle of their request, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mk 10:37). They come to Jesus loaded with requests and demands to be met.

They also come to Jesus in arrogance. Jesus asks them if they are able to drink the cup that he drinks or be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized. Of course Jesus is referring to his eventual suffering and death by crucifixion. The two brothers respond thinking of themselves and their ability

more highly than they ought. They say, “We are able” (Mk 10:39). They come to Jesus in arrogance, thinking of themselves more highly than they ought.

James and John spent time with Jesus but they couldn’t shake the identity and image that sinful pride, arrogance, envy, and covetousness shapes and molds within the human heart and mind. An image that shows itself through the common desire for the path of least resistance. An image that shows itself in the various ways we as sinful human beings wrongfully seek power and control over situations and people. An image that bears itself through a desire to be served rather than to serve.

There is a little James and John in all of us. We desire the path of least resistance. At times we inappropriately seek power and control over situations and even people. We desire to be served rather than to serve. We choose to chart our own path rather than accepting in contentment God’s path for us. In the process we can forget the cross.

Jesus was teaching and modeling for his disciples the path of the cross. He even calls them at one time to pick up their cross and follow him (Mk 8:34-35). But they couldn’t help but wander down their own path. A path of glory. A path void of struggle and suffering. A path void of the cross.

The path of the cross is the path of our Lord. On the cross we see the identity and image of Jesus as servant. Though he is Lord of all he became a servant for all to purchase forgiveness for all who wish merely to serve themselves. He became the obedient suffering servant for those who would unjustly usurp the role of lord and master. He bore the cross for those who frequently bear forth improper desires for power and control over one another. He pursued a path of love and forgiveness for all those who would rather pursue the path of least resistance. On the cross we see Jesus identifying with sinners as the sin bearer. We see his outpouring of love and forgiveness for us.

The outpouring of love and forgiveness from our Lord gives our lives new shape. Jesus’ outpouring of love and forgiveness on the cross gives us a new identity. As Christians see the cross as the pattern for our lives. We die to self and live to God after the pattern of Christ as the Spirit imprints and impresses the cross on us (Mark 8:27–38; Rom. 8:13; Gal. 4:19). The cross gives our lives a new identity in Christ as the lords and masters, James and Johns within us die daily and the Christ-like servant rises. This “cross shaped” pattern becomes the pattern of our lives here on earth until the final trumpet sounds (Rom. 6:1–14; 8:18–39). And this cross-shaped identity brings with it joy for the disciple. Incomprehensible joy. It is joy that comes from service to others rather than from power, control, self-service, and seeking the path of least resistance.

When Jesus and his cross is first our gift then he and his cross can be our example and pattern. Since he first gave himself and continues to give of himself for us, Christ our servant then rests in us. The Christian identity and life is shaped by the one who gave his life on the cross. Being shaped and formed by the death of Jesus to live the life that he has given us. Sacrificing for one another. Serving one another. The cross-shaped life. Amen.