

You know, when we get right down to it, we are the happiest and the most at peace within ourselves when we live as our Creator intended. We are at our unhappiest and least fulfilled when we allow the world to influence us to live as the world prefers. It is the most important daily struggle in our lives.

The reading today brings us to a scene that has been developing in Mark's Gospel for some time now. Jesus and his disciples are heading for Jerusalem. They walk along the road briskly with Jesus probably ahead of everyone else. Behind him the twelve are somewhat confused, reluctant, and questioning. Behind them is a crowd of people looking for relief from their problems and answers to their questions.

Jesus had just confronted the disciples for the third time with difficult words he longs for them to understand. Just down the road a while back he had taken them aside and foretold once again what would happen when they got to Jerusalem. 'You see,' he said, "the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death." To say that his friends were bothered hearing this would be an understatement. Jesus goes on, "Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him, and they will condemn him to death. After three days he will rise again." We can imagine the reactions of the disciples when they heard this from their teacher and their friend. We can picture Jesus just shaking his head and walking on ahead of them.

James and John were probably back there muttering to each other, and now they hurry to catch up with Jesus. They tell him they have a request. He asks, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" "Teacher, we want you to grant us to sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, when you come into your glory." Jesus looked at them, probably sadly, and said, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to endure the suffering, the humiliation, and death that I am about to undergo?" They still don't get it as they exclaim, "We are able!"

Although Jesus was probably disappointed about their lack of understanding, I doubt that he was really very surprised. He knew human nature better than anyone else as he had confronted it in a way no one else could. What we have to remember is that, in Jesus, God was not trying to change human nature, nor was God learning about us. Through the words and actions of Jesus, God was trying to show us the truth of who we are. A major problem for us human beings is that we want to be in control which makes it hard for us to submit to anyone else, including God. We look at the world through our own eyes, think we are in charge, and kind of create it in our own image. When what we see or hear does not fit into our own understanding, we reject it. We don't like being told what to do, even if it is God doing the telling.

The entire Bible is simply an attempt to teach us who we are, what our basic problem is, and God's response to us and our problem, it's as simple as that. The very first story in the Bible, Adam and Eve, gives a preview. They had it made, a great place to live with anything a person could want, free for the taking. There was one wee little catch, they were not allowed to eat the fruit of one particular tree. Everything else was theirs! Of course, we know what happened. They just could not stand it and soon they had eaten that well-known apple. No one was going to tell them how to live, by golly. And, of course, they were not responsible, the original example of "the devil made me do it!"

In the 3rd century St. Augustine wrote his powerful autobiography "Confessions." One day as he was leaving for school his mother said, "now, do not bother our neighbor's apple tree!" He wrote that the idea had never crossed his mind before, but all day he could not get those apples out of his mind! He could hardly wait to sneak into his neighbor's yard to steal one of those bright red, delicious, and now *forbidden* apples. Like Adam and Eve, it was not anything he had desired, or even thought about, until it was forbidden. No one was going to tell him how to live his life!

In the Old Testament Book of Job, he suffers a great deal and demands that God tell him why this had happened to him as he has done nothing to deserve such treatment. Job actually interrogates God! No one

was going to lord it over him, not even God. Later in the Old Testament when various prophets tell the people that they had better change their ways, they killed those prophets. No one was going to tell them how to live their lives!

And now in the Gospel, James and John refuse to listen to any talk about suffering and want to grab a piece of the power for themselves. No one was going to tell them they could not be Number One. I think what all of these biblical accounts tell us is that we human beings think that we know what is best for ourselves, but the truth is that we don't. Let's face it, we are all really children, some with a few more wrinkles and maybe less hair than in the past, but we are all kids in the eyes of God. We are truly "the children of God." Remember that childish question these two disciples asked, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Did they really think Jesus would bite on that? He made them get more specific so that they could see how that went against everything he had been trying to teach them. Of course they didn't get it.

How often do you and I do the same thing as we proceed to tell God what we want done for ourselves? Most of us have our lives pretty well mapped out, some for several years into the future and others for a week or two. As we go along accomplishing those things on our agendas we invite God along for company, asking for his help in getting some of this stuff done. If we think about it, that is no different from James and John, or even Adam and Eve, for that matter. We are in charge of our lives and we wish for God to help us to be healthy, successful, pain-free, or just happy. I suspect that there is a good chance that we don't get it either.

Only one thing will truly satisfy us and give us peace, one thing, and that is to live not as we want, but as God wants. That is the point of the entire Bible. We make this much more complicated than it is, but then, that is what sin does. What Jesus wants us to do is to recognize that our ideas of failure and success, and weakness and power are all wrong and even backward. True power and success are demonstrated in those moments when we put others welfare ahead of our own. We know that is true by the way we feel inside when we do just that because we are living as God wishes for us to live. The ultimate example, of course is the suffering and death on the Cross of Jesus for others. What was true for Adam and Eve, for James and John, is also true of us. Those things God forbids us to claim are those things which are destructive for us and work against the God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Now, we may not like that.....no, let me rephrase that...we do not like that any more then children resist limits set by their parents.

So, it is always in the act of servanthood that we discover who we are and that wonderful things happen in our relationships. If we human beings accepted Jesus' teaching as truth and lived by it, there would be no need for words such as "abuse." Relationships would be built on the foundation of each person putting the other first, now, there is a radical idea. The reality is that when someone else puts us first, we want to do the same for them, and that makes for a true Christian relationship as it is about giving, not receiving.

Each of us has many opportunities to serve others every day, but only if we are actively looking for them. Our problem is that when we are focused on our own needs and troubles, we are pretty much blind to the needs of others. This is the daily challenge of trying to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, and when we have those times when we are able to do this, we discover a joy and sense of purpose found in no other way. Jesus asks each of us, "what is it that you want me to do for you?" What if our answer is, "Lord, your will, not mine, be done. Help me to serve others in your name that I may live my life as my Creator intended and that you demonstrated for me."