

There's a viral video going around the internet of a young woman on her first day of work. She explains that she just graduated from college a week ago, so of course she wanted to spend all weekend partying and celebrating with her friends before she went into work for the first time on Monday. Naturally she needed to sleep in after such a weekend. When she rolls into work, her boss asks her where she's been. The young woman is offended! It's none of his business. She deserved to celebrate after all the hard work she put in at school. She tells her boss that she's walking away until her boss changes his tone. He tells her she might as well keep walking and clear her desk on her way now. The woman then goes to her car and vents to world about the injustice she just received. While this is a shocking attitude to most of us, it isn't all that surprising. It's human nature to be self serving. Often that leads to self absorption, exactly when James and John had in today's Gospel. Jesus directs them and us in another direction by telling us it is his nature to serve us. It's a powerful reminder that when it's time to build, it's time to serve others with joy!

It doesn't take more than a quick glance to see a self-serving nature in James and John. Look at what they say to Jesus, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." It's the exact opposite of, "Your will be done." That doesn't mean that people can't ask God to do things that they ask. God encourages bold prayers that don't hold back. But it's what people ask which reveals the attitudes of their hearts. Believers often ask for physical and spiritual health, safety, and blessings. But James and John weren't after the gifts God promises to give, they were after power. And they were pretty smart. They saw the big picture. They didn't ask God to make them mayor of Jerusalem, or even the emperor of Rome. They wanted eternal power and authority in heaven. Second only to Jesus himself! They wanted the ultimate power and glory. They wanted a power that would last forever!

Why were these two men so bold? What made them think they had a chance? They wanted to use their personal connections to their own advantage. They were the friends of the miracle man! They knew Jesus! They were his loyal followers. As they believed him to be the Son of God, and the promised Messiah, they knew that they had the rarest of opportunities. They could use their connections to get on God's good side and profit from it. It wasn't that crazy, at least humanly speaking. James and John are thought to be Jesus' cousins and John is referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved and James was the brother of John! James was using both of his connections to his advantage. If you had this chance, wouldn't you do the same?

The other ten disciples certainly didn't think so. This maneuver by their fellow disciples didn't sit well with them. How dare they try to get this kind of power and respect for themselves?! Aren't we just as close to Jesus as them? Who do they think they are!?! This anger of the disciples wasn't a righteous anger. They weren't mad that John and James were filled with human pride and self-service. The ten had jealous anger, a self-serving anger. They were probably mad they hadn't thought of asking Jesus to make them the most important people in heaven first.

How often do we see ourselves in the sinful natures of others? I wouldn't put it past myself to try to use a connection like that to my own advantage. It's our sinful nature to always put ourselves first, and others last. It might even reach a point where we want to put ourselves over others. And it doesn't take much. Parents face the temptation to think that since they are the adults, they're automatically better than their children, and can't make real mistakes. Or at least, not big enough sins to ever go to a child for forgiveness. Bosses can have the same attitude with workers,. Students and employees will put others down and pump themselves up. Husbands can be overbearing with wives, and wives can show little or no respect for their husbands. Taking a close look at ourselves reveals a nature not unlike the disciples.'

Our jealousy, like that of the other ten disciples, often makes us speak out against anyone we think might be getting more than us. If a sibling gets an extra ice cream cone, your cubicle neighbor a bigger bonus. Our envy burns inside. We want the best for us, we don't want less than anyone else.

We also aren't afraid to use our connections selfishly. A child may suspect a favored status with a grandparent or coach. An employee may try to get away with more than others because the boss likes them. We all use our connections to a loving Father in heaven and a merciful Savior and Lord to not treat sin seriously, knowing that God will always forgive and forget. What a mess! What a mess we are in with our sinful, selfish nature.

I bet none of us want to be in Jesus sandals. Here he has two of his followers asking for literally everything, and the other ten are upset beyond reasoning. What do you do? You can't make everyone happy. But everything comes into focus, as if coming out of a dream, when Jesus redirects his disciples. He asks them if they can go through the baptism of suffering he is going through. He tells them "if you want to be first, serve everyone!" Serve everyone? At first it looks like it's a plan to follow to get the best for yourself. But then you realize, I can't serve everyone, that's too much work, that's impossible! Jesus turns the disciples, and us, away from the way of "earning, deserving, and getting" to trust in his mercy. You see, serving everyone isn't just a suggestion. It isn't just an option for those who want to be first. It's the law. God demands that everyone serves everyone. It's a requirement that's already broken. We can't serve everyone. We can't make ourselves first. On our own, we all end up last, not first. We all end up lost.

But then Jesus reminds us all that we aren't on our own. That's why he is here. Jesus came to serve everyone before himself. That was his mission and purpose for coming to earth. As the creator of us all, Jesus could certainly demand that we serve him. But he doesn't. He does the opposite. He lived in our place, gave up his life, and gave us the power and proof of the Resurrection. That's right, his birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, wasn't for him. It was for you.

Some people say that the God is a tyrant and a dictator. Telling people what to do and believe. But no tyrant serves his people only. No dictator demands his own life be offered for his people. Jesus is both our merciful Savior and graceful Servant. Now his request to serve each other takes on new meaning! The word Jesus uses to say "serve" is the same word that can mean, "be a slave!" And that is what it means under the law. To serve each other is a slavery, we can't win, we can't get out. But now, in the freedom of forgiveness, that word means something totally different. Love each other in humility because you belong God. Serve each other because Christ serves you.

We don't have to worry about others being ahead of us in heaven. We don't have to worry that our competitors in this life, might rule over us in the next one. Jesus is the one who sits on God's right hand. There is no other. Through Jesus we all have become the first-born children of God and have the full inheritance of heaven and eternal life. So now, when it's time to build the church on earth, it's time to serve with joy, because we have the gifts of Christ's service to us. Amen.