



Walt Disney's company has created a lot of magical kingdoms. But he wasn't content to just create magic on the screen. He devised a plan to have a rather unique production studio. It was more than a production studio; it was an entire small city dedicated to his company. The campus was designed so that the workers could live right next door. The community had all the amenities a production artists could ask for. There were places for workers to hang out, to swim or work out, to shop, and top-notch places to eat right on the Disney studios campus. To work at Disney meant you got to live and work in this magically constructed little kingdom. But it wasn't all perfect. A strict system of privileges existed for the employees. The top writers and artist had the best places to live. They would walk the shortest distance to work. And when they arrived at work they had their own special floor of the building. Each top employee would walk into their office and have a company rug and chair which were fit for a king. Much of the rest of the staff, however, were made to learn their place. They were the common editors, fill-in artists, and camera operators. They didn't have a special rug or chair. They didn't have a special home or office location. A documentary on Walt Disney recalls first hand what it was like for some of his employees back then. One top level writer decided he would start to socialize with the other workers -those on the lower floors. He was warned that he shouldn't spend so much time hanging out with those other lower-level workers. He didn't listen. One day he came into his office to find that his special chair and special rug were gone. When he approached his boss about it he was told, "You're just not cut out to be one of the top animators anymore." So much for a magical little world.

Perhaps that production studio wasn't all that unique in the way it operated. That's the way all the world works, isn't it? People want to know where they stand; and everyone wants to stand on top of the heap. What about when it comes to God's kingdom? God's family and his Church aren't a business or a movie production company. But we work together to carry out important ministry. We work together to train the next generation in God's Word and to send out missionaries to spread his kingdom. Might it be that God's people could find themselves struggling to get on top of others? As we near the end of our "Family Values" sermon series we see the disciples yet again struggling for top position. But this morning we are reminded how God's kingdom operates in a very unique way. It's not about who is ruling on top. It's all about who is serving on the bottom. We turn once again to Mark 10 as Jesus teaches: Our family serves the world.

James and John came to Jesus with a bold request. "Teacher, grant that when you sit in glory one of us may sit at your right and the other at your left." One could argue they had reason to be so bold. These two men, along with Peter, had already received some special treatment a couple of times from Jesus. When he raised a dead girl and when he was transfigured, Jesus took just these two brothers and Peter into his inner circle to witness it. Jesus, for reasons unknown to us, choose to make these men witnesses to some things the others weren't. They were privileged to have these close encounters with Jesus and no doubt noticed they were in something of an inner circle. They assumed this afforded them some special perks.

But they had no idea what they were asking. Jesus explains that if they wish to be close with him in glory that means they will be close with him in something else: his suffering. "Can you drink the cup that I'm going to drink and be baptized with the baptism I'm going to be baptized?" he asks. The expression "undergo a baptism" was being used here to mean "face an ordeal." And the expression "drink a cup" refers to the cup of suffering Jesus is about to face. He had just clearly explained to them what this ordeal of suffering would involve. And it was now at least the third time he had openly done so. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him..." (Mark 10:33-34) Jesus is saying that following him means to also follow him in suffering. John Newton was right when he wrote the famous hymn line about our road to heaven. We come "through many dangers, toils and snares."

James and John weren't deterred. "We can, Jesus!" they responded. Jesus says, "You will drink the cup I will drink and be baptized with the baptism I will be." And they would. James would be the first to the twelve disciples to die by drinking the cup of suffering. He was put to death by the sword. His brother John would be the last to die, undergoing suffering as an exile because he followed Jesus. But suffering for following Jesus still wouldn't give them the spot they asked for. Jesus says that those places of honor are prepared for someone else.

Their request did, however, get them into hot water with the other disciples. When the other disciples heard about what James and John had asked they were rightfully upset by it. Who did they think they were? Why did James and John think they were supposed to be on the top tier while everyone else sat below them? Suddenly we find that James and John weren't the only ones with an interest in who was number one.

It all kind of sounds like the squabbling between the top animators and writers at the Disney studio, doesn't it? This type of struggle shouldn't be found in God's kingdom. But it is! Today's disciples will strive for a higher position while they serve as pastor, missionary, or as the president of a congregation, church district, or synod. Their primary concern becomes being in charge and being above others. Instead of looking to how they have been called by God to serve they ask "Why can't I be in charge? Shouldn't everyone come to me for advice and look up to me?" And just as the twelve disciples got upset at James and John for their power grabbing the rest of God's people get upset. "Why should they be on top? What makes them so

special? Shouldn't I be in charge?" From the pastor who wants prestige to the person in the pew that wants top preference everyone vies for control. Why? Everyone feels they ought to be served by all others. This includes pastors proudly prying for the spotlight over their brothers, congregational presidents in lovelessness pushing their own agenda, district presidents making power plays, synod presidents making pawn moves, and all believers down to the person picking their preferred congregational practices in worship and ministry. Everyone wants to be in control and be served. You and I want to be in charge. You and I get jealous when others are in charge.

But when this happens we've lost sight of what makes God's kingdom different from the kingdom of this world. When pastors, presidents, and parishioners get so concerned about who is serving them they lose sight of who they are to serve. Instead of serving one another they become self-serving. Instead of supporting called and qualified pastors and professors in mission fields and seminaries, they squabble. Instead of joyfully serving to spread the gospel they argue. Instead of supporting each other they step over each other. How foolish we can be! And instead of carrying out God's mission those who seek top position carry out the devil's agenda to divide God's church. Instead of the Church being altogether unique in the way it works it mirrors the world. Instead of carrying out its mission people in the world are left to die as lost souls.

How can the work of God's kingdom be done? Jesus redirects his disciples to a whole new attitude of service. Jesus called the twelve over and said to them, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all." You want to be on top? God's kingdom calls for you to be the servant and slave of all. And Jesus doesn't just call for such service. He gives it. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus could have demanded a pay higher than the highest teacher and even higher than the highest king. But he didn't. Instead he had no place of his own and no possessions beyond what he needed for life. Why? He didn't come to be served; he came to serve. As their teacher Jesus should have demanded that his disciples wait on him hand and foot and shower him with service. But he didn't. Instead he would end up acting as the lowliest of servants as he attended to their needs and even served and honored them by washing their feet. Why? He didn't come to be served; but to serve. And he could have asked as Lord for his disciples and all his followers to take up their swords to fight off his arrest and lay down their lives to help him. But he didn't. Instead he told them to let his disciples go and allowed them to bind up his hands and lead him off as prisoner. Why? He didn't come to be served, but to serve even to the point of giving his life.

His life was given as "a ransom for many." Jesus' greatest mission and purpose in life wasn't to claim his position which he rightfully deserved. He came to take a position he didn't deserve. He stepped into our place. He became a ransom payment in service to us all. We in sin demand that others serve us; Jesus in grace served all sinners by giving up himself.

And his service wasn't just for those close to him. It wasn't even for those who deserved it. It was for his twelve disciples - including the ones who sought to be number one and those who were jealous. His service and payment was for "the many." This includes every sinner. It includes you and me. He died so that we can now live in his truly wonderful kingdom!

Now we too serve. Our service goes beyond our friends and immediate family members. It goes beyond serving a boss to get a higher position. It extends to our brothers and sisters in the faith. We serve as we put ourselves at the bottom position. We serve as we give up our claims and our rights for their sake. And with them our service extends to all people everywhere. One missionary might be sent to San Diego another might be sent to the Sahara. It doesn't matter. Both go serving the world as they willingly drink a cup of suffering or undergo an ordeal of suffering for the sake of their ministry. One pastor might serve as missionary at a preaching station with twelve in attendance and another might serve as district president. None is greater if they both seek to serve the world with the gospel. One person in the pew might be singing a song they don't enjoy another might be singing their favorite because their suggestion won the day. It makes little difference if both sing to serve the gospel and build up a brother or someone new to the faith. Our synod is to work in this light. Synod doesn't mean walking on top of each other, it means "walking together." Side by side we serve. Now our family serves each other, and it serves the world.

It's not about who is at the top. It is about Jesus who reached down to serve at the very bottom. This is now the third time in these three short chapters that Mark records the disciples struggling for a higher position. It is the third time Jesus has mentioned his giving his life in the lowest position. Perhaps God knew it is a message that merits repeating. He knew that like his disciples they'd need to be reminded of what it means to be great in his kingdom. How foolishly lost we can become trying to get on top. But how graciously low our Savior became to make us members of his family.

God's kingdom is altogether unique in the way it operates. Our church and our synod are to be different. They exist not for the sake of the person in the pew or for the sake of the preacher at the pulpit. They exist to seek and serve the lost. We exist as a congregation and as a body of believers in our synod to serve the world. Why? Because Jesus didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Now may we drink the cup he drank and do the same. May we each serve one another so that we can better serve the world together. Someday we'll be served at his heavenly banquet. And I don't care if I'm at the right, the left, or the far side. I'll be with Jesus -and so will many others who were served by Jesus and served by his people. Amen.