

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**October 22, 2006**

**Mark 10: 32-45**  
**Secret Ambition**

Jesus is telling the band of disciples one more time what is going to happen when they get to Jerusalem. Two brothers in the group tell Jesus that they want him to do whatever they ask of him. Without criticism, Jesus asks what they want. They proceed to tell Jesus that they want the places of honor in Jesus' glory—to be seated on the right and left of Jesus. It's easy for us to look in upon this scene and be wise—we've read the story; we know the outcome; we can shake our heads at the audacity of these two.

The request James and John make would not be unusual in ancient Mediterranean culture—personal effort and favor with the one who has the greatest place of honor was one way a male could gain a higher place of honor. Jesus does not grant the favor, but asks if they are able to drink of the cup he will drink, the cup that signifies his place of leadership. In Mediterranean culture, the head of the family fills all the cups at the table. Everyone drinks what the head of the family gives. The cup came to represent the lot in life which God had assigned.

When the other disciples hear the request of James and John, they get angry. Jesus reminds them of the Gentiles whose rulers lord it over them. “But it is not so among you.” Why? Because Jesus came to serve, not to be served. The one who wishes to be great must be your servant. In another place in the Gospels, Jesus does something radical to illustrate just what he means by serving. Do you remember what he does? Washes the feet of the disciples.

Michael W. Smith had a hit song and video called, “Secret Ambition.” The chorus says:

Nobody knew His secret ambition  
Nobody knew His claim to fame  
He broke the old rules steeped in tradition  
He tore the Holy Veil away  
Questioning those in powerful position  
Running to those who called His name  
Nobody knew His secret ambition  
Was to give His life away.

That's the story in today's lesson. So what does it mean to us on this October day in 2006? What does it mean to us to drink the cup of Jesus? If to be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus, what does it mean to us to give our lives away? Often

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when we speak of Jesus as being the servant, the one who washed the feet of the disciples, we use the word humility. Jesus' vocation was that of a humble teacher who loved the unlovable and broke bread with those rejected in his world.

When we think about being a humble servant like Jesus, do we imagine that Jesus heard God's call, shrugged his shoulders, and then hung around the back of the synagogue every now and then to see whether there was a rabbi who would take as a student someone who was the wrong age to be asking and whose background was colorful at best? If that's humility, then Jesus would not have felt authorized or empowered to abandon conventional obligations (his mother, sisters and brothers) to become an itinerant teacher.

But that's Jesus, we say! He's the Messiah! He's supposed to do all the stuff he did. Is it not possible that the way Jesus responded to God's call is also a way for us to respond as well? Is it not possible that we have a role to play in changing our world?

True humility is not about pretending we are worth less than we are;

True humility requires recognizing who we are and how valuable we are.

True humility requires claiming the power we have in this world.

True humility requires using the power we have to empower others.

True humility requires recognizing the worth of every other person.

If you know the story of Jesus, you know that is exactly how he lived on earth. If you don't know the story, keep listening. We'll tell you more. True humility is not about pretending we are worth less than we are. We are created in God's image. We are members of the body of Christ in our world—i.e., Christians. We are empowered by God's Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that was given to the followers of Jesus on Pentecost in the first century.

We...you and me, my dear friends, are invited to participate in God's mission of healing and reconciliation...it's what we were born to do. We have power in this world. We want to shrink and hide in the background and say that no one will listen to us...but we have power. We own property. We get paychecks. We pay taxes. We are not poor in comparison to the majority of the world.

I hear people say that there should be no hungry children in the US of A.

What will we do with the power we have to change that?

I hear people say that we should be helping our own instead of sending aid around the world.

I ask this question—why can't we do both?

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We all have been given abilities and talents. Some of us will be able to help those who are close to home. Some of us will be able to help those on the other side of the world. Scaling back because we believe we have no power serves no one and nothing but the status quo, and especially if the status quo serves you as well as it serves me, we are buying into the materialism of our culture and that is selfish, not self-giving.

Hundreds of thousands of people over the centuries truly understood what it means to drink the cup of Jesus...to accept the call to make a difference in the world. Let me remind you of one such woman, Florence Nightingale.

When Florence Nightingale and her nurses showed up in the British war hospitals at Scutari, on the Crimean front, conditions were worse than they had heard. They witnessed filth, infection, disorganization, and an overwhelming caseload. Shiploads of desperately needed medical supplies sat in the harbor while men died, because some official had not filled out the proper forms. In this environment, 42 percent of the wounded never recovered. It took all of Nightingale's training and dedication, and then some, to turn things around.

Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy, (hence her first name) in 1820 to an English family of ample means. She traveled and attended parties with the "chosen of society" on the family estate in Derbyshire. When she was 16, she received a divine call: "On Feb. 7th, 1837," she wrote, "God spoke to me and called me into his service."

The call was as mysterious as it was audible...what service? Seven years of uncertainty followed. Over family objections, she began "cottage visiting" taking food and medicine to poor farmers who lived on the family's lands. Then she began to think about nursing; her family was scandalized. In the early 1800s, nurses were considered unskilled laborers and were reputedly drunken and promiscuous. Proper ladies kept a fine house, gave parties, and made brilliant conversation.

In 1844 American philanthropists Samuel and Julia Ward Howe visited the Nightingale home. Florence asked them, "Do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals?" Dr. Howe replied, "It would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is thought to be unsuitable. But I say to you, 'Go forward.' " After that, she

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later wrote, "there never was any vagueness in my plans or ideas as to what God's work was for me."

That work did not begin for another nine years. Family objections had to be overcome. Meanwhile she studied nursing, first in books, then by visiting European hospitals, and finally by training at hospitals in Germany, England, and France. She was serving as director of a home for "invalid gentlewomen" when the Crimean War (1854-56) broke out.

When she heard about the deplorable conditions on the front, Nightingale took 38 nurses to see what they could do. She ended up organizing the barracks hospital, including a kitchen, laundry, and clean latrines. She opened windows to let in fresh air and provided supplies by cutting administrative red tape or buying them herself. She provided reading and recreation rooms for the patients, wrote home to their loved ones, and provided a safe way to mail their pay home. The soldiers adored her and christened her the "Lady of the Lamp," after the Turkish lantern she carried on her midnight rounds. Her efforts brought remarkable results: the death rate dropped from 42 percent to less than 3 percent.

Florence said this about her life:

“If I could give you information of my life, it would be to show how a woman of very ordinary ability has been led by God in strange and unaccustomed paths to do His service with what He has done in her. And I could tell you all, you would see how God has done all, and I nothing. I have worked hard, very hard, that is all; and I have never refused God anything.”

We all know that what Jesus ask of James and John was not easy. It's not any easier today. Each of us has to decide what we will do. The promise of God is that we will not go alone and our lives will be more meaningful than we ever imagined.