

“Seat Selection”

a sermon on Mark 10:35-45 by Nancy Raca
Covenant United Methodist Church, October 18, 2015

Have any of you been on an airplane in the past year?

If you have, then you know that good seats on an airplane come at quite a premium these days. If you want more legroom, then you need to be prepared to pay for it!

On some airlines, there are no pre-assigned seats. That means you need to check in early and get on that plane to claim the seat you want. And the seat with the most legroom? That’s the exit row. I was on a plane recently where the seat next to the exit door in the middle of the plane didn’t even have a seat in front of it! You could have fit a lounge chair in there. So *that’s* the seat you want if you’re looking for a comfortable ride. (Presumably, it’s also the seat you want if you want to be one of the first ones out in an emergency.)

But watch out! Because before you take off, the flight attendant will come around and demand the attention of all of you sitting in the exit rows. He will ask you if you are willing and able to open the emergency exit. He will ask you if you are capable of following directions from the flight crew.

Are you willing to do all these things? Are you willing to keep calm in a crisis – even to help others exit the airplane *before you*?

Because with the *privilege* of sitting in one of the roomiest seats in the airplane comes *responsibility*.

With privilege, comes responsibility.

All of this reminds me of our friends James and John, the sons of Zebedee, in today's reading from Mark. James and John, two of Jesus' closest followers, say to Jesus, "We want you to do something for us." Basically, they say, "We would like to go to the head of the line and get the best seats, please."

"Well.....," Jesus says, "are you willing to pay the premium?" Are you willing to drink my cup?

Jesus has already said, in the passage just preceding this one (though we don't hear it in today's reading), that he's going to die, and it's not going to be pretty. Jesus knows that the cup he's going to drink is the bitter wine of death on the cross. Are the disciples ready to do the same?

Because Jesus knows that with privilege, comes responsibility.

James and John say they are willing to do what it takes, but it turns out that in fact Jesus isn't giving out seat assignments today. "To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant," he says.

Jesus does give the disciples some "frequent flyer" advice, though:

If you want a better seat, then you need to serve others.

This doesn't seem like such good news for the disciples, or even for us.

That's because we live in a society where we are accustomed to earning stuff, whether it's frequent flyer miles or money in the bank or the privilege of a certain seat in the church. As a culture, Americans tend to believe that we are entitled to what we have, because we've earned it – or because we've purchased it. Bought it with our money and our blood, sweat, and tears.

And that leads us to think that maybe, if someone can't buy something, or someone doesn't have something, they haven't earned it.

Maybe that's what James and John are thinking when they approach Jesus. After three years of following Jesus around dusty Galilee in their sandals, James and John feel like they've earned something. They *deserve* a seat next to Jesus in eternal glory! They've been faithful! They've suffered! They have blisters on their feet and holes in their shoes to show for it! They have earned some special treatment!

They don't get it.

They don't get it and neither do we – every time we think that we deserve something that others don't have because we have *earned* it, or bought it.

When we want that most comfortable seat on the airplane, the one with the most legroom, it's not in our nature to step to the back of the check-in line and let others

go in front of us. It's in our very *human* nature to nudge ahead of people, to stake our claim, even to buy our way to the front.

But Jesus' way is different. Jesus tells us that we can't buy or bargain our way into glory. He says that whoever wishes to be great must be a *servant*. And, Jesus goes on to imply, not just a servant – because a servant gets paid and can quit. Jesus says we actually need to be *slaves* of all. Slaves! Locked in the complete and utter bondage of servitude.

Because the way you become great – the way you get a good seat – is through sacrifice. It's through emptying yourself, putting others first, and showing grace.

We have opportunities for this every day – *especially* today. Today, we celebrate the Children's Sabbath. The Children's Sabbath is a national effort to lift up children and families in need and speak out on their behalf. In Monroe County, more than 200 faith communities will take part in this effort this year.

And that's great, because the children and families in our area have some significant needs. You've heard me say this before but I'm going to say it again: 22% of children in Monroe County live in poverty. Within the city of Rochester, it's more than *half*. More than *half* of our city's children live in poverty.

And yet, most of these children live in families where all available parents are working. That means that these families need safe, reliable, high-quality child care. But have you checked the price of child care lately? For a single parent working a

minimum-wage job, the cost of quality child care is, quite frankly, out of reach. So that leads us to a vicious cycle: I need to work to support my family, but my job doesn't pay enough for me to afford quality, reliable child care for my children, so I have to find ways to take care of my kids as I can, either by missing work myself, or leaving them with an older sibling, or piecing together neighbors and relatives who can watch them – and that unreliable schedule ultimately leads me to take reduced hours at work or even lose my job altogether.

Help *is* available, in the form of child care subsidies for working families that help parents secure safe, reliable child care. But there are far more families that need that help than we have money for. In fact, only about one in five families that needs a child care subsidy gets it. One in five.

We, as citizens, and as Christians, can do something about this. We can speak out on behalf of working families. We can advocate on behalf of kids who, through no fault of their own, are not getting the care they need to get a good start in life. You can do that by signing the letter you received with your bulletin this morning and placing it in the box in the back of the Sanctuary. We will take those letters and deliver them to officials in Albany who are in a position to make important changes on behalf of kids.

Some people will not agree. Some people will think, “Well, I raised my kids without any help.” Or “People who can't afford kids shouldn't have them.” But that's the kind of thinking that Jesus is warning us *against*. No matter what *we* have done, or who

we are, or what we believe we have earned, that does not make us greater than anyone else. Jesus tells us that to be great, we need to serve others. We are called to put *others* ahead of ourselves.

It's a tough pill to swallow. So many of the things that Jesus says are so hard for us to hear, and even harder to do. Because what Jesus wants from us is against our human nature.

Fortunately, Jesus has an answer for that. We don't have to worry about how hard it is, because Jesus has already paved the way for us. Jesus – God incarnate – came among us not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus has redeemed us from our earthly failings and shown us by his own life how to go forward.

So, go ahead -- take that exit row seat. But don't take it for the legroom, or so that you can be the first person off the plane in an emergency. Take it so you can make sure that *every person* on that plane gets to safety *before* you. Use your position to serve others.

Because here is the Good News: no matter what seat you have on this very earthly plane, God is your pilot. And every single seat on this plane is going to the same place. Because Jesus already did the work for us, and God is going to see each one of us safely landed at our destination.

So whether you're in the exit row, or first class, or the back row next to the bathroom, remember where you're going. And don't worry so much about yourself, but make this flight as comfortable as possible, for everyone.