

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2015**  
**Pilgrimage to the Manger**  
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

**Mark 10:35-45**

**REFLECTION**

**As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.**

- Henry David Thoreau, American Author (1817-1862)

**“Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence.”**

- Henry David Thoreau, American Author (1817-1862)

**“Every man, every woman who has to take up the service of government, must ask themselves two questions: 'Do I love my people in order to serve them better? Am I humble and do I listen to everybody, to diverse opinions in order to choose the best path?' If you don't ask those questions, your governance will not be good.”**

-Pope Francis, Argentinian Clergyman (b.1936)

**Choosing a Path**

The Gospel of Mark is my favorite of the fab four. Written in the vernacular – common language – he weaves his stories in and out of one another, echoing themes and drawing his readers into comparisons and insights.

Our text this morning is meant to remind us of the scene in chapter 6 where Herod makes an offer to his daughter Herodias (not to be confused with his unlawful wife, Herodias, who manipulates behind the scenes).

6: 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, ‘**Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.**’ 23 And he solemnly swore to her, ‘**Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.**’

Four chapters later:

10:32 They [Jesus and his followers] were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.

And as they were walking:

10:35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "**Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.**"

What Herodias asked for was the head of John the Baptist – who had been saying all those nasty things about Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife. It was a revenge killing bought with position and power.

What James and John are asking for is position and power – with an obvious reference to Herod and his family. And what Jesus offers them is the chance to suffer and die with him – placing them all on the platter with his cousin John's head.

This is a conversation on the road, in the midst of one of Jesus' pilgrimages or treks to Jerusalem. And it has to do with choosing the path one takes when joining the Jesus Movement. If we are in it for the position and power – to establish an institution that can manipulate and control the behavior of others to our advantage – then Jesus is the wrong person to follow. To call Jesus "King" is to miss the point and stray from the original path. To recognize Jesus as "Servant" and choose to serve and suffer for the sake of justice and compassion – then maybe we have found our way.

There are obvious comparisons in our own time and nation –

- government employees who use their perceived seat on the right hand of Jesus in order to deny citizens of their right to marry...
- elected officials who use their position and power and beliefs to justify the removal of funding from health care for women and low-income families...
- or to deny the facts in order to get their way – ignoring climate change and corporate greed in order to pave the way for profit...
- religious people who choose hate over mercy, judgment over love, buildings and endowments over human lives...

The list is long. It was long when Jesus was on that road to Jerusalem. He told James and John that they had some choices to make. And so do we. And this is where I offer kudos to Pope Francis, an unusual pope to say the least, and his amazing perspective from a position of great power:

Every man, every woman who has to take up the service of government, must ask themselves two questions: 'Do I love my people in order to serve them better? Am I humble and do I listen to everybody, to diverse opinions in order to

choose the best path?' If you don't ask those questions, your governance will not be good.

To govern or lead well one must be willing to question everything and choose one's way carefully. The thing that is so exhausting about our choices – is that we are not just faced with one choice and we're on our way. We have choices to make every day – multiple paths with obvious and not so obvious destinations.

Each of us has our own inner demons and desires to wrestle with and those don't go away. I get so tired sometimes and just want to take the easiest road, hitchhike to the nearest fancy hotel and settle in. But the right choice is to stay with the people I care about and find shelter with them in less than comfortable surroundings – like tents in a dust storm on a Playa – or a rental space in a Lutheran church two blocks from remembered glory.

And this is where I turn to Thoreau for encouragement:

As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.

Those thoughts are choices – and as we think our chosen thoughts, we cut our path.

And this is where I lift up our life as a church – this beloved community – as a place to think again and again about our choices, creating the path we wish to follow, reinforcing the habits we wish to develop to make sure our lives are meaningful and make a positive difference in the world.

This is where we can reflect on various intersections we encounter, read the signposts and choose our direction thoughtfully. This is where we can find support for our choices and renew our commitments to living out our core values.

And this is where we can remind ourselves that we don't do this alone. We have each other – and can find accountability partners willing to support without criticism or judgment.

And we have, eternally, a G-d that is larger than any single choice – a G-d who accompanies us and helps us arrange our better choices into a sacred pilgrimage over a lifetime – however long that lifetime happens to be.

[Possible conversation about choices we are currently making and needing support for...]

## Mark 10:35-45

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

## Mark 6:17-28

6:17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' 23 And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' 24 She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.