Sunday, October 19, 1997
FIRST AND LAST
Mark 10:35-45

For most, if not all of us, to be first is good; to be last is bad. We prefer to be first in line, chosen first, be first in the rankings — whether it's football, school class, business, beauty, skill, or success. I remember how embarrassing it was to be the last one chosen when, in grade school on the playground, two captains were selected by the teacher, who then had each captain choose sides for each team. It was an honor to be the first one chosen and depressing to be the last one chosen.

In contrast, in the Bible, Jesus is frequently quoted as saying, "The first shall be last and the last first." I didn't know that verse then. If I had, it might have given me some comfort.

In today's story from Mark's gospel, he is quoted as saying to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be the servant of all." What is all this talk about "first and last?" What is Jesus asking us to be? How does it relate to you and me? Here's the background of the story.

One day, James and John, who were brothers and disciples, came to Jesus with a special request. First, they said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." What is your answer if someone comes to you and says, "Will you do for me whatever I ask?" I suspect your experience is the same as mine. There are times when someone says, "Will you do me a favor?" If I have no idea at all what the favor might be, I'm a little hesitant in quickly answering, "Yes."

Instead of instantly agreeing to their request or denying it, Jesus asked a follow-up question: "What is it you want me to do for you?" Although in this case I think Jesus probably had some idea about what they were going to request, he wanted to hear them say it out loud. This was something Jesus frequently did. Sometimes, before healing an individual, he asked, "Do you want to be healed?" To have someone clearly define exactly what it is he or she wants is very important. I've sometimes found it very useful to ask individuals when they come for help or even to complain, "What do you want me to do specifically?" It can enable or even compel individuals to explore and discover what their real desires are. Frequently, Dr. Laura Schlessinger in her radio talk show will ask the caller, "What exactly is your question for me?"

The request of James and John was (and now I'm paraphrasing): "Teacher, in the near future, when you are in all your glory in the presence of God, the two of us want to be second in command, one seated at your right hand and the other at your left. Can you promise us that?"

These two disciples were not dummies; they knew the world they lived in does not rank people who are servants very high. If you want to be first in this world, you've got to have position and power. You need to have people serving you, not you serving them.

They also knew that one of the best ways to get a position of power and influence is to have someone who is powerful appoint you to a high position alongside them. Some of their power is then automatically transferred to you.

Isn't it true that many times, like these two brothers, we ask for things we think we want but have not thought through the implications of what we are asking or what the ramifications

might be if our request was granted? Every time we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come," do we know what we're praying for? I know one person who prayed, "Thy Kingdom come," and then, under his breath, said, "But not yet."

Jesus warned the brothers, "You do not know what you are asking, what the price is that you have to pay if you want your request granted. Do you think you can go through the pain and suffering that I'm going to experience? Are you willing to pay the price?" "Oh sure," they replied. "We can do it."

The son of a Welsh mining family had not wanted to go into the mines as his brothers had, but instead joined the British Navy and spent many years touring the world. When he came home once from his travels, he showed his father a shriveled-up monkey's foot that he had gotten in Egypt. The legend was that if one held this foot and made any three wishes, they would come true. However, the son had also been warned not to use it because everyone who had used it before had experienced tragedy. He said, "I've decided to take this warning seriously, and I'm going to throw the monkey's foot into the fire."

However, his father was intrigued by the story and took hold of the charm and said, "I wish more than anything else in the world that I had a two-hundred-pound note at this moment." No sooner had the words left his lips than there was a knock on the door. The father went and there stood a representative of the mining company. He said, "Your son has been killed in an explosion underground, and it is company policy to give a two-hundred-pound note to the family of such victims to cover the burial expenses. Here it is. I'm sorry."

On hearing this, the father, still holding the monkey's foot in his hand, began to weep loudly. "Oh no, oh no! Bring me back my son, bring me my son. I did not want the money at his expense." Again, there was a knock on the door, and there stood four miner friends carrying the mutilated body of his son, who had been killed. "Oh no, take him away. I cannot bear the sight of my own flesh and blood, now dead." And so the friends turned away and went to bury him privately. All three of the father's wishes had come true, yet none of them in the way he expected.

As Jesus said, "Sometimes we do not know what we are asking." Are you willing to pay the price to be first? To achieve a worthy goal takes discipline and endurance. Are you willing to pay the price? It's a principle that applies to all of life. Do you want to rank first in your school class? Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want to be an outstanding athlete? Are you willing to pay the price?

Carl Lewis, after he won the gold medal in the 1984 Olympics, was asked how many years he'd spent developing his tremendous skills. He replied, "The day I stopped crawling and took up running."

The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome was painted by Michelangelo. This required his lying flat on his back. But that posed a problem because he had a bad back, and the position he had to endure while painting the ceiling caused him excruciating pain. Moreover, he had some kind of nasal obstruction which cut off much of his air supply while he was on his back. So what? He spent time on his back all day every day for 20 months. He often slept with his clothes on so he could go back to work without losing time in dressing. And he painted one of the great masterpieces of all time.

In 1949, an unknown scientist started work seeking a cure for a devastating disease known as polio. He worked 16 to 18 hours a day, six days a week, for five years. The ultimate discovery of a polio vaccine by Dr. Jonas Salk came about because he was willing to pay the price.

Do you want to become a concert pianist? Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want to be of service to human beings in the same way as Mother Teresa and be honored as she was honored? Are you willing to pay the price?

There are no easy ways to acquire excellence in any field. We must be willing to pay the price, and the price is inner discipline and endurance. It's no accident that the word "discipline" comes from the word "disciple," meaning to follow a certain way or teacher.

We live in a time when too many people expect overnight success. We want instant wealth, instant success, instant stardom, quick promotions, fast growth, speedy solutions to our problems, and even instant maturity.

On the other hand, there are many people that I admire very much because of what they have been able to do with their God-given abilities. They have been willing to pay the price. They are what I would define as successful not because of the amount of money they make or have made, but because they are willing to fulfill their potential, willing to pursue excellence — not because they are seeking recognition for being ranked first, but because in that way they can be of service to others in addition to fully using the gifts God has given them.

What I have noticed above all else is that all of these individuals possess the character quality of discipline. They know the price and are willing to pay it.

I've also known other people who've had a successive string of setbacks and failures in the distant or recent past and who do not have a sense of direction in their lives. If you asked them, "What happened?" they would probably offer you a very candid appraisal as to why some of these calamities have come their way. They would say such things as, "I started to let things slide. I got careless. I didn't follow through. I took too many shortcuts. I lacked endurance. I started missing classes. I stopped doing my homework one day. I became complacent. I didn't take care of myself. I thought problems would solve themselves. I neglected my spiritual nourishment."

Are you willing to pay the price? Our Christian faith reminds us that the qualities that make for a good beginning are not the same as those qualities of character which see things through to the end.

Do you want to be first? "Become the servant of all," said Jesus. That does not mean you are to be a doormat for others to walk on. It means rather that you are not being first merely for the sake of being first so that you can say to others, "I'm better than you."

Being first, as Jesus defined it, means not giving in to pure self-gratification. It means rather losing yourself in a cause that is bigger than you.

Many people delude themselves into believing they can achieve their dreams by asking someone else to do something for them instead of making the hard decisions and then following through on their own. That's what James and John were asking Jesus to do for them.

Making good decisions and accepting responsibility are the most God-like qualities the Creator has given us. Being created in God's image means we have the ability and the responsibility to choose. Being willing to pay the price means being willing to make the hard choices and then follow through.

Have you ever noticed that no person has ever been honored for what he or she has received or for what they own? We give honor to people for what they give, not for what they have received. No wonder Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Today we are paying special attention to the children and young people in our congregation and community. To put our children first as parents and as a church means we have to be willing to pay the price.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with a young woman who had recently taken a job in a daycare center that was operated as a franchise. She described the place as overcrowded and understaffed. Many of the young children, she said, arrived early in the morning unhappy and distressed, and it was hard work to give them the attention and love they needed. She said the work was so demanding that the staff turnover was high, and this added to the children's sense of abandonment.

To make matters worse, she said that many of the parents had chosen the place where she worked for daycare because it was the least expensive, even though they could've afforded to pay more for better quality and where turnover was not a problem. In addition, some of the parents who were using the daycare did not necessarily need to have both parents work full-time outside the home. If they were willing to pay the price, one of them could've been a stay-at-home parent.

We can be proud of our congregation for being willing to put children first, for being willing to pay the price, and we can be proud of our children and young people for the service they are giving in our congregation and in the wider community.

Today we celebrate the gifts children bring to our lives, and we acknowledge our responsibility to provide for all children the means for a full and joyful life in harmony with other people and all of creation. For us and our children, we are seeking "Shalom." Amen.