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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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29th Sunday of Year B Mark 10:35-45

It's not uncommon for parents, when they have to intervene to separate their small children from squabbling with each other, to hear, "He started it," from one and from the other, "No, he started it." Adults, at times, can act like small children, even the closest disciples of Jesus. In today's Gospel we see two of the apostles trying to position themselves upfront ahead of the other ten. We have to ask ourselves, how often do we act like them? How often do we try to control and dominate the situations in which we find ourselves, and then look with surprise when people around us have their noses out of joint, because some little power play that we've pulled has just backfired. This passage gives us the opportunity to reflect on the subject of our ego-centeredness—and on the necessity of changing ourselves, before we try to start changing everyone around us.

It is a fact of life that people do things that bother us, that hurt us, that annoy us. But as quick as we are to feel that pain, just as fast are we to say that it's all his or her fault. Again, what we might reflect on today is where I may have put the ball in motion, where I may have started the spiral of charge and recrimination, setting myself up to get hurt, without realizing what I was doing at the time. Who started it? What role does my "ego" play in trying to make things more secure, more comfortable, more convenient—just for me and nobody else—and eventually the whole thing falls apart in my face?

Now to return to today's Gospel, we see the Zebedee brothers, James and John, going to Jesus, totally misunderstanding what His mission is about, but trying to get in early on the action and have the best seats at the table. They see the role of being an apostle as a career path to wealth, prestige and fame. They are in for a big surprise! This gives Jesus an opportunity to instruct them on what precisely His message is all about. When the others get wind of what's going on, the Gospel says, "they became indignant," and so we see dissension and hard feelings all around. No wonder the other apostles reacted to James and John as they did, when they realize how these two brothers were trying to secure their own interests at the expense of the rest.

This little story from the Gospel might help us to see how often our troubles can be of our own making—how often our self-centeredness is at the root of them. We can be driven by a hundred different forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking and self-pity. Naturally, we try to protect ourselves from the dangers that besiege us. In our attempts to do so, we may be stepping on other people's toes. Eventually they will

retaliate. What I am suggesting is that on those occasions when people hurt us--seemingly without provocation--if we look hard and long enough into our lives, we may very well find that at some time in the past, I made a decision--based on self, on self-will, on having things my way--which later put me in a position to be hurt. Back then, maybe without even noticing it, I thought of myself and no one else. Although I may not have noticed it, others did and waited for the opportunity to trade back in kind with the pain, the hurt or the injustice that they experienced from me.

Then, there is the more subtle instance of the ego at work in the expectations we set in the most personal of relationships, wherein, without even informing the other of what we want from him or her, we script a role for that person to perform that is set not to who they really are, but to what we hope they will provide for us. When they fail to perform as we want them, or suddenly rebel against the strictures of a role too tightly imposed upon them, we are surprised, we feel hurt. Again, is it really their fault, or just the attempt of my ego to create a world designed to the specifications and demands of "me?" The Taoists, the religious philosophers of China, have a proverb that sums it up well enough, "He who feels punctured," they say, "must once have been a bubble." Because I have been puffed up with my own self interest, with the aggrandizement of my ego, I may have exposed myself to the very hurt and pain that I had been so desperately seeking to avoid.

This is not something that none of us likes to hear--that many of our troubles can be of our own making; it's always easier to blame the other guy. The good news is that if so many of our problems are of our own manufacture, then maybe we can change ourselves, and thereby not set ourselves up for the fall--that with the grace of God, which is stronger than our egos, we can imitate the generous love of Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel challenges us to be honest with ourselves--to examine those quarrels, those grudges, those disputes we've held onto for so long, sometimes with the tenacity that a dog holds onto its favorite old bone. The Gospel challenges us to reflect and see how I may have contributed to the sorry state of affairs that now exists, and that is not all his or her fault. We see here the wisdom of the message of Jesus--that it is not a call to self-abasement or self-denigration, but to be truthful, to be honest, first of all with ourselves. Jesus words about service invite us to empty our egos of our "me-first" concerns, of our self-centeredness, to begin to be more sensitive to the needs, the worries, the concerns of those around us. Let us pray that we be delivered from our blindness and fear--the twin devils that make our egos the centers of our universe. May our Eucharist, then, be the source of freedom from that enslavement to ego.