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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X41
Evensong 21 (Readings for Sunday Proper 24B)
Thursday 26 October 2017

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Mark 10:35-45

Downhill Skateboarding for Your Life

"... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all" (Mark 10).

The film begins with an indistinct figure furtively pulling a chain across a country road. The next frame shows professional skateboarder Liam Morgan charging down hill. Watching him draws you to the edge of your seat – he seems so close to disaster. He shifts into a speed crouch accelerates and then carves through impossible turns. He slides into light and then shade, on a perfect afternoon.¹

A voice-over interviewer asks for his advice. "What would you say to kids who want to be pro downhill skaters?" As he answers you realize that the chain was to stop cars from coming up the road while he was bombing down it.

People often complain about getting older. They are right about your body not working as well. But one of the greatest blessings is that as you add more seasons to your life you encounter more people. You see how their stories develop and connect. There is a joy in watching time pass, in seeing the changes it brings. God blesses us with the gift of holding the past and the present simultaneously in our mind.

I have known Liam for his whole life. I think I baptized him. A third of the video shows him skateboarding the same street our old church is on and talking about how various friends were injured there.

He answers the question of how to become a pro skater. He says that the most important thing is not getting sponsored. It is not the free equipment, travel, fame and money. He says that you need to skate for the love of the activity itself. In fact, he says it will be more fun for you without the money and fame.

We have a hard time understanding this. In our society so much seems to be based on buying, selling and competing. We see so many advertisements that tell us that we will be happier with an upgrade to first class, an exclusive sports car or a beautiful house. We are more likely to be fooled into thinking that going to the best college or getting the most prestigious job will make us happy.

When James and John ask Jesus for the seat of honor it is like calling shotgun to claim the front passenger seat. They want to be upgraded, set above and apart from the other disciples. This makes their friends angry.

It is easy for us to look down on them as if we were not trying in our own way to get seats of honor ourselves. Because we stand on this side of history we know that the people on Jesus' right and left are the ones who are crucified with him.

Jesus says that being the winner, having that seat of honor or any other special privilege that sets us apart, is far less joyful than being the one who serves others. We were made to care for each other, to find fulfillment in our connections, even by our dependence on each other. The most complete person will be the one most fully committed to others.

So many times I have heard this story about the greatest one being servant of all. It is not wisdom that you hear once and then are immediately changed forever. We keep coming back to Jesus' words because we need help with this. The presence of Jesus in stories like this transforms our life over time. We hear this story over and over and like a sunflower we turn our face to the light.

Last week I received a letter from a friend who used to surf with Liam's dad and me. He wrote, "even more than the waves I remember our time together on our way to the ocean."

I sometimes wonder how Liam will answer the sponsorship question twenty years from now. I wonder if he will say that even more important than skating itself are the friendships he has made through it.

Your life is an adventure. Take a risk to live for something other than getting ahead of everyone else. Launch yourself down hill. Feel the wind on your face. Enjoy every turn. Love this life for its own sake. Look for chances to take care of each other.

¹ Prism Skate Company, "FACES – Liam Morgan," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11X-BEz9suM&feature=youtu.be>