

October 21, 2018 • 22nd Sunday in Kingdomtide

“What Jesus Asks of Us”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 10:35-45

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.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” 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?” 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; 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.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus and the disciples, including James and John, had returned home to Capernaum, Mark’s Gospel tells us. Along the way, Jesus had been teaching about them something they didn’t want to hear at all. He was trying to help them begin to understand that his way of being Messiah wasn’t anything like what they had imagined or hoped for. He wasn’t going to be a king or rule an empire. He wasn’t going to sweep them into power on his coat-tails. He wasn’t going to win popularity polls or be the richest man in the world. He won’t be a best-selling author or an Academy Award winning director or even the Teacher of the Year.

In none of these ways, would Jesus ever be famous, would he ever be powerful, would he ever be important. No. He was the Messiah. And he was going to suffer and die. His kingdom was of a very different sort. In his new realm, everyone would have the same equal access to mercy and to grace.

Now the rulers of the Gentiles, he explained, are something else altogether. They lord it over their subjects. Their great leaders impose authority upon them. “But it shall not be so among you,” he explained. “Whoever would be great among you must also be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be servant of all.”

Is it any surprise that this was not anything those first disciples wanted to hear? Let alone take on for themselves and live into? They weren’t buying it. At all. Which brings us to the exchange we overhear this morning as they’re pushing back hard. “I want to sit at your right and I at your left in your glory!”

Jesus takes them on. “All right. What DO you want me to do for YOU?” They don’t come off very well, do they? Oh, we want it all, Jesus. Status. Position. Authority.

We get to overhear this story as it unfolds. And don’t we just love it when Scripture points out the faults of someone else—that other person who is mean or greedy or clueless or heartless? So when we’re reading along and come to a particularly troubling passage, such as the one we hear today, doesn’t it feel great to sit back and think: “Whew, sure glad you’re not talking to me, Jesus!” Weren’t those disciples stupid? Here’s Jesus talking about suffering and death, and they’re asking him about their own positions of status, power, and authority...

Of course, the troubling thing about the Gospel is that just when we think we’ve found a way to point it towards someone else, it has a sneaky way of curving back around like a boomerang and there we are, staring it in the face while it’s coming at us full speed ahead.

And so it is that we find ourselves approaching Jesus and saying to him: “Teacher, Lord, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you to do.” And Jesus says: “What do you want me to do for you?” And then, even if we’re not presumptuous enough to ask for greatness, I have a feeling from my own experience that our answers would reveal just how much we can be like those first blind disciples.

What might we say were Jesus to ask us: “What do you want me to do for you?” What DO we ask of him...in our thoughts, our prayers...

Maybe something like: “Lord, please make my life easier... Lord, I want you to remove the pain and suffering I’m experiencing....Give me a good life. Give me success in my work, a perfect family, a loving spouse and grateful children...Give me good friends and good grades...Give me a long and happy life....”

Often our prayers can be all about me. We’re looking for a way out, a way up, and we want Jesus to make our lives into a story that begins with “once upon a time” and ends with “and they lived happily ever after.”

Thank goodness we’re not always stuck in that selfish, self-centered place. Part of the reason we come to church is to pull us up and out of ourselves and shift our focus to the lives of others. But there is, within us all, a part of us that’s still a little child and wants a faith that is appropriate for children. And lovingly, God can offer us some that, and that’s OK if we remember that those are the beginning, little baby steps of faith.

An adult faith is a lot harder, a lot more demanding. It requires a lot of us. An adult faith has to incorporate suffering and risk and sacrifice. It can make our life harder, not easier, and it get us into all kinds of places and relationships we never imagined. Jesus WILL intentionally share his life with us, but in ways we cannot yet imagine or would not deliberately seek. The life of faithful discipleship has something to do with the cross we bear, the yoke that's easy, the unfolding of our lives as a living sacrifice. As servants one to another.

I need to say a couple things about this word "servant" because when we hear it now, it takes on meanings it didn't have in the original Greek and it also loses some of its original meanings. When we hear the word "servant," we have a collective memory of all the ways in which peoples have been forced into servanthood through history, people who were servants by class or economic status or race. This form of compulsory servanthood, servanthood based in oppression and exploitation, is NOT the meaning of the Greek word "diakonos" which we now commonly translate as "deacon."

The servanthood of Scripture, diakonos, refers to a way of taking on one another's cause, of addressing the other's best interests and deepest needs out of love and mutuality, of belonging to one another (SIGN).

Diakonos, being servants to one another, describes Jesus' relationship to us and to God as a way of living together in the bonds of community, a way of living with and for each other. In serving one another, we come to know who Jesus, God incarnate, really is and what he asks of us.

This notion is not completely foreign to us, is it? Our human relationships work the same way. We go into friendships, marriage, parenting with all kinds of ideas about love and comfort and happiness and fulfillment. And hopefully we discover all that, but that's not all we find, is it? We also discover pain and challenge and conflict and all kinds of things we never bargained for, never would have asked for. Whenever we get involved in people's lives---WOW! Things can get messy and complicated.

But that's just when relationships can take on deeper meaning and power as well. When friendship and love can push us to be a better person, nudging us to wrestle with the best of ourselves rather than resting in complacency with who we are, to become the most loving, humane, caring, committed, generous—the very best person we might be.

Seems to me that this is the kind of life Jesus calls us to when he calls us to be servants of each other. It's the way in which he himself was a servant to God and God's people. It's a way that gets us all tangled up in people's lives and involves us in pain and conflict as well as that which is satisfying and harmonious.

The great Dr. Albert Schweitzer once put it this way: "He come to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word "Follow me!" and set us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who he is."

It's in "our own experience"--the doing, the living, the serving, that we fulfill our calling. We always want to know what's going to happen to us in the end. Jesus is more concerned with what we're doing along the way. As to who will sit at his right hand or his left---God has already taken care of that. Jesus' focus is on the harder questions and his assertion that disciples WILL drink of the cup and be baptized by the same baptism as he. Jesus doesn't ask any more OF us than he's already done FOR us. He calls us to follow him on the road to the cross, a road he has already travelled, a road he continues to travel on our behalf.

Servant Jesus is for us always more the question than the answer, more the Way itself than the end, the journey that reveals the homecoming.

And when Jesus invites us to follow, he invites us to get all tangled up in people's lives, just as he did. He invites us to share in their joy, their happiness, their pain, and their sorrow. He invites us to get involved with the sinners, the outcasts, the undesirables, as well as with the beautiful, the successful, the "happy" and the healthy. Whether it's the homeless or the hungry or the gang members or the refugees and immigrants or the foreigners or our neighbors or even our own family—whoever it is, Jesus invites us, as we follow him, to live lives of service to them, to serve rather than be served. When it all goes well, it's exceedingly fulfilling and rewarding. When it's disappointing, difficult, complicated, messy—it can be confusing and painful. But, in it all, in the totality of it, we become disciples of the Christ AND come to know and understand Who he really is.

Servants to one another. Belonging to one another. SIGN

So we continue on down this path, together, belonging to one another and to him and to all God's children. In our lives "being the Hope" in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, with whomever God puts in our path. And may we pray that when Jesus asks us: "What do you want me to do for you?" to have the grace and courage to respond: "Lord, bid us come and follow you."

AMEN