

Sermon October 20, 2024

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."

Serving Jesus

For months, they had walked on long, dusty roads. Hot and thirsty, physically and emotionally exhausted. They had left everything they had – family, jobs, possessions. They kept going because they really believed in this wonderful man named Jesus... believed that he would change the world... that he would bring about a new kingdom greater than the Roman Empire or any of the empires that came before.

They followed Jesus in faith, but they don't seem to want to hear the details. Three times now Jesus has told them exactly what's going to happen... that he is going to die. Each time they react badly. Once, Peter actually rebuked

Jesus for talking about his rejection and suffering, and Jesus responded by calling him "Satan." Another time, the disciples responded by arguing over who is the greatest, with visions of power and wealth dancing in their heads. Every time he told them what would happen in Jerusalem, they shut their eyes and their eyes to the truth.

And once again, they just don't get it. James and John had been whispering amongst themselves, and finally they get their nerve up and approach Jesus: "Teacher," they say, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

And right there, in the first sentence of our reading today, we have a problem. "*We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*"

They've got it backwards. Instead of offering to do whatever Jesus wants them to do, they want Jesus to do what they want.

Now before you cross your arms and say, "Uh, huh, what's wrong with these fools!?" let's be realistic. This is a trap we all can fall into. Following Jesus is risky... he tells us that over and over again. We want to follow, but so often we want to follow on our own terms.

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

I understand this attitude. One of the reasons it took me so long to pursue ordination after I graduated from Vanderbilt is because I was trying to force my ministry to fit into my own terms. I stubbornly went on for years, trying to convince myself that the work I did and the life I led fit snugly into God's plans for me. "This is my ministry," I would say, completely ignoring the insistent voice within that knew that God had other plans for me.

*"I'll follow you Jesus, but I want you to do whatever I ask of you."*

We all do this. We want to be faithful disciples, but we also want to hold tight to our families and our jobs, our possessions and our hopes and dreams. We don't really want to do what the disciples did – or what Jesus told the young man to do last week, and drop everything to follow Jesus. We want to live our lives and pick and choose the ways we serve him. And we want Jesus and God to be available to do whatever we want them to do for us.

We really aren't so different than the disciples. So, we need to listen carefully to how Jesus responds to this request.

"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?"

Of course, the disciples say. Visions of golden goblets dancing before them, they see confirmation that they will be great and powerful leaders with immediate access to the king. Seats on the right and left of the throne.

We, of course, know that they have committed to something different. The seats on the right and left are already taken by 2 criminals, nailed to a cross. The bitter cup and fiery baptism were ready-- The royal throne and powerful access were not. Jesus' words of "drinking the cup" and "baptism" point to death – Jesus' own death and the death of most of his earliest disciples.

These words of faithful sacrifice point to the deaths of faithful followers throughout time, the saints of the church. In our own time, we remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and missionaries in far away countries. Any number of other martyrs who literally died because of their faithfulness to Jesus. But what about rest of us who long to follow Jesus faithfully, but will most probably not lose our lives for doing so?

Jesus' words point the way for us as well. It is not just a matter of being martyred, it's really a matter of being transformed. Transformed, renewed and restored!

Jesus calls us to be willing to climb to the mountaintop and letting the experiences change us, mold us, transform us. It happens to different people in different ways. Sometimes it is a sudden, life-changing event... other times it is during a long journey. But, but it always involves "a letting go" of the things that offer a false sense of security or power. Letting go... because you know that God is right there with you. Closer than your next breath!

When we let go, we are willing to move forward with Jesus, no matter what the consequences, even if we are never asked to give the ultimate sacrifice of our life. When we let go, our priorities shift, and we see the needs that still need to be met... and we are willing to do the work that is required. WE

stop worrying as much about job security and bank accounts and more about the needs of our neighbors.

Instead of asking Jesus to do what we require, we ask Jesus what is required of us.

We ask, we listen, and we respond.

Sometimes Jesus takes us to far-away places, other times we serve Jesus here in our own communities. When we welcome the stranger in our midst without judgment or expectations, we find ourselves on the right side of Jesus. When we share our food with a hungry neighbor, we find ourselves on the left side of Jesus.

Jesus tells us all the time what he needs from us: an insistent voice deep within your soul, a subtle push in the small of your back, a chance encounter with a neighbor. When we act in the name of Jesus with no thoughts of how it affects us, we are baptized in faith. When we reach out to those who are thirsty for the Jesus' words of justice and mercy, we are accepting the cup that is offered us. When we gather together and share at the table that is prepared for us, we find ourselves exactly where we need to be.