

Scripture and Message
20 October 2024

Scripture: Mark 10:35-45 NRSV

³⁵James 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."

³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

³⁷And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

³⁸But 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?"

³⁹They 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, ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So 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. ⁴³But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: Christian Service

This is one of those stories in the gospels where I just want to give the mom death glare to the disciples. I mean, really James and John, trying the old 'promise you'll do this for us, Jesus, without knowing what you are promising trick?' My kids stopped trying to do that in pre-school. Please tell me this didn't happen like this. Surely this is one of those examples of editorial compression, of taking something that happened at another time and slipping it in here to make some sort of larger point. This story is bad enough on its own. But as Mark places it in the narrative, James and John come off as the dictionary definition of crass.

We skipped a few verses in our walk through the tenth chapter of Mark's gospel. Last week, we listened to Jesus's teaching about the difficulty in accepting the challenges of God. How easy it is to see the invitation to grow as too difficult as God continues to challenge us to get better, be kinder, love more fully – and now we start this passage with James and John oiling up to Jesus with their painfully selfish request. In between, we have Jesus baring his soul. I realize that this isn't the text for the week but let's take a moment and reflect on these words. You can't help but read the gospel lesson in a different light if you do.

Remember, Jesus and the disciples were just about ready to start out to Jerusalem, which is where the first verse left out starts, ³²They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again, he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ³³"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

There's a lot going on in these three skipped verses. Too much to unpack. But after all that, we have James and John. It just feels icky that after Jesus talks about being mocked and spit upon and flogged and killed that James and John sneak up and say, "Give us the best seats in the house!" They did it on the sly, you notice. Mark says, "When the ten heard this," they blew a gasket. So, James and John snuck around and asked Jesus

this when the others weren't listening. Maybe they'd wandered off after Jesus talked about going to Jerusalem to die, and the sons of thunder seized their moment and grabbed Jesus. They started with, "We want you to do whatever we ask." Maybe it reads better in Greek, or maybe the original Aramaic doesn't sound so smarmy. This is just an ugly moment for two members of the inner circle of disciples. Except that Jesus doesn't take it that way. With what seems infinite patience, he explains to them what's involved here. "You don't know what you're asking," he says to them. Weren't you listening? Well, apparently, they were, because when Jesus itemizes the route to his ascension, they nod their heads with enthusiasm and say, "Yep, we can do it!" "Are you able," he asks. "Yes, we are able," they replied, and then proceeded to write a hymn about it.

*"Are ye able," said the Master, "To be crucified with me?" "Yea,"
the sturdy dreamers answered, "To the death we follow Thee."*

Here's the amazing bit. Jesus agrees with them. Wait, what? Go ahead, look at verse 39, after their foolish declaration. Jesus says, "Yeah you will." Well, Jesus says it this way, "Then "The cup that I drink you will drink and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized." Whether Jesus means the inevitability of persecution that will fall on all the disciples and the first century church, or he sees something of significance in the two of them who will be part of a movement that changes the world, it is hard to say in this moment. But Jesus treats them with more kindness than most of us would have in that less than stellar moment. Jesus and by extension God, treats us with kindness and love even when we don't deserve it, when we are being selfish, or rude, or even unkind.

Have you ever met anyone like that. Someone who manages to look past your momentary lapse in manners and responds to your heart and not to what you said. Occasionally good friends do that, don't they? It can be disarming, refreshing...it can diffuse a situation and keep it from becoming ugly, or uglier. And speaking of ugly, our story that starts to get ugly, as soon as the other disciples learn what James and John have been up to, they get mad. Why are you guys trying to get special seats? Why do you deserve special treatment? And once again, Jesus steps in and sees past the angry words to the hurt feelings and the need for each of us – each of the disciples to feel included and special – and Jesus reminds us of what we need to do for the kin-dom. Instead of looking for the best place, we should give others a place. Instead of choosing the choicest bites of food, we should create meals for those who haven't had a bite. Instead of expecting the best we should give our best. Instead of wanting to hear accolades we should thank people and speak a kind word. Instead of expecting others to make our community a better, kinder, gentler place, we should ask ourselves

What can I do today to make life better for this community? One person I know makes it a point to always pick up any litter, any trash they see lying beside the road or the sidewalks or trails. Another person I know tries to find someone who is down and lifts them up with an anonymous coffee, or just by holding open a door. Others make a point of smiling and waving at each person they meet. I know one person who tries to find a compliment to give in every interaction. What can I do, what can you do today to make life better in this community, Jesus asks us, and the disciples, when he states that in the kin-dom we will serve others to be like him. "Service isn't a strategy," he says. It is not a means of getting to the top, of achieving a personal goal. Instead, service is a way of being. Service is our way of living.