

To Serve and To Give

Mark 10:35-45

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October 20, 2024

*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.'*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The sons of Zebedee are more than a little cringey. In Matthew's account of this same story, they aren't even the ones to approach Jesus. Their mother asks Jesus to let her sons flank him in his glory. Now *that* is peak cringe. It is never a good sign when someone prefaces a favor seeking assurance that they'll get anything and everything they want. It's as though James and John *know* they are being ridiculous. The Disciples are often depicted as bumbling and clueless in the gospels, and these brothers take it to the next level. After all, the exchange unfolds immediately after Jesus has just described, in excruciating detail, how he will soon be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed before rising again on the third day.

That prediction is a lot to take in, so perhaps we should give James and John the benefit of the doubt. They were probably more than a little freaked out. They had abandoned their homes and families to follow this rabbi, and Jesus kept prognosticating about his

violent and bloody death. Awkward. Maybe neither of them would have had the gall to make the tacky ask if not for the other brother; you know how it is, how human beings can inadvertently be a little dumber, a little meaner, when two or three are gathered. Maybe they were clinging to the bit about the good part on the other side of the bad part: the promised rising on the third day. Maybe they figured they could recoup their losses if they could get in on that delicious glory. Or maybe they were as vainglorious as they seemed on the surface, selfishly jockeying for prestige. I suppose it's possible they weren't actually after power at all. Maybe they just really loved Jesus and longed for a guarantee that they would be near to him, forever and always. Ultimately their motives were probably mixed, as most human motives are.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, isn't having it. You can almost glimpse the involuntary roll of his eyes, as exasperated as an adolescent. You can almost hear him sigh audibly and utter that epic burn favored by southerners: *bless your heart, boys. You have no idea.*

And they really don't. James and John do not know what they're asking. They may have heard Jesus prattle on about his rapidly approaching demise, but they remain in total denial. They cannot imagine their Teacher hanging on a cross, so instead they lean into what they can imagine: their Teacher sitting upon a throne of glory.

It's a lovely thing to imagine. And to be fair, it isn't entirely wrong. The scriptures envision Jesus enthroned at the right hand of God. A heavenly temple is the final destination of the Son of God after his life, death, and Resurrection.

It's just that the way to glory isn't up. It's down. The way to faithfulness isn't ambition. It's willingly swallowing a cup of suffering. The path to greatness isn't power. It's servanthood. *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

I wonder if the Sons of Zebedee were tempted to leave. This wasn't what they signed up for. I wonder if we are tempted to leave. This wasn't what we signed up for.

James and John lived in a land where honor was tantamount, and so they asked Jesus for a place of honor. We live in a land where the pursuit of happiness is tantamount. If Jesus asked us what we want him to do for us, for many folks the honest answer is this: I just want to be happy, and for my loved ones to be happy. I can't help but laugh and remember the old Saturday Night Live skit that we watched in the Chrysalis Book

discussion last week. (If you are surprised that Chrysalis watched an SNL clip, you are definitely underestimating how much fun we have around here.) In the skit an overly honest travel agent repeatedly reminds people that his vacation packages cannot make miserable people less miserable. They'll just be the same miserable people, only in Italy. Yet many of his customers engage in unrealistic expectations and magical thinking. "A day is a long time to be happy," he explains. "Most of us get forty five minutes if we're lucky."

It's funny because it's true. And unfortunately, the overwhelming emphasis on happiness in our culture makes a lot of people unhappy. This is something that some cultural commentators have been saying for a while, and in the last five years or so, hard data has emerged to back the theory up. Americans are less happy than ever, and one of the problems is that we've been led to believe that seeking happiness is the path to a meaningful and fulfilling life. But it's often fleeting, just out of reach. At the risk of making too many Saturday Night Live references, I feel like a real Debbie Downer. It's bad PR to call the pursuit of happiness problematic. It's *unamerican*. But maybe we do not know what we are asking when we place personal happiness at the heart of our aspirations, any more than the sons of Zebedee knew what they were asking when they centered personal honor. It's not that Jesus doesn't *want* to give us what we want. But Jesus is too wise, too merciful, too good not to invite us to want something better. Jesus leads us away from our disordered desires and directs us to the cross. The cross is the opposite of power, of glory, of happiness. And yet, the cross reveals the depth of God's suffering and sacrificial love.

To be clear, it is rational to want to avoid the cross. It is reasonable to run from the scandal of a dying God who likens himself to a servant, even a slave. This is where things get really cringy. Deities are supposed to be fierce and powerful. They should inspire fear and trembling, not pity and pathos. A God depicted as a tyrant flanked by powerful cronies is far more compelling than a God revealed as a crucified man flanked by crucified criminals. Where is the glory in that embarrassing death? And yet at every turn, Jesus emptied himself, lowered himself. *The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

And in this, Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus gives us what all of our lesser idols can only pretend to give us. Best of all, the redemptive and liberating work of the cross is not some private reward. Christ is a ransom for *many*. The scale of

what happens on the cross encompasses the personal but also the cosmic. This giving of his life gives life to all Creation.

When the church is willing to be serious about following Jesus into this way of giving and servanthood, we are in a unique position to bring solace to an unhappy world. Not by wielding power or promising happiness. By following Jesus to the side of those who suffer and despair. By ministering to those in sorrow. By standing in solidarity with those who are beleaguered and besieged. By fighting for justice and offering comfort. By singing songs of praise and lullabies of care in a culture overrun by shouts of division. By giving as we have received and serving as we have been served.

This is hard. This is unnerving. The temptation to find shallower water, a quicker fix, an easier path is very real. Jesus wonders if we are able to drink his cup and be baptized with his baptism. He knows our fickleness, our propensity to put ourselves first, how completely hooked we are on the empty idols of power, influence, and illusory happiness. And yet, if we trust this man - if we believe in this Son of God who gives his life as a ransom for our own - we cannot fool ourselves that we'll find what we're looking for elsewhere. In the words of a wise friend, it's "not just that God is with us in our life, but God is our life."

God is our life. The grace of this truth is fathomless. The joy of this truth is eternal. God is our life. We don't have to save ourselves. We don't have to prove ourselves worthy. We don't need Jesus to do whatever we ask of him, because on the cross Jesus has already done everything we need from him. *God is our life.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.