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Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Washington, DC  
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29th Sunday in OT, Year B

Mark 10:35-45

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to [Jesus] and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

<sup>36</sup>And Jesus said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'

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

<sup>38</sup> 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?'

<sup>39</sup> 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;

<sup>40</sup> 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.'

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

42 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.

43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

45 For the Son of Man came to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

## Getting It Right and Getting It Wrong

I have a longtime friend who is a few years older than I am. He is a wise, emotionally intelligent, politically savvy guy who I look up to in many ways. Sometime in our 20s, our relationship changed slightly when I began to realize that some of what impressed me about him, was not that he had any more smarts than I had, but his willingness to declare things boldly and confidently in conversations. I remember saying to him one day, "you don't really know what you are talking about right now, do you?" And he gave me a big grin and said, "Often wrong, never in doubt."

My three year old is that way, too. It is not uncommon for us to have a conversation that goes something like, "Good morning. Happy Tuesday." To which, he will often respond, "It's not Tuesday." And there is no convincing him otherwise. *Often wrong, never in doubt.*

Op-ed pieces and hot-takes that get passed around on social media feed right into this mindset.

If I'm honest, my husband could tell you that I'm not immune from it either. Especially if I'm feeling hurt or afraid.

*Often wrong, never in doubt.*

James and John Zebedee definitely suffer from this syndrome. These two disciples — two of Jesus' inner circle — these guys come to Jesus with an incredibly audacious ask.

"Teacher," they say, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask." and if that weren't enough, the ask is "We want to sit at your right hand and at your left."

*Often wrong, never in doubt.*

The text says the other disciples get irritated. I'm guessing this is not the first time these Zebedee boys have displayed such hubris.

And Jesus, well, I love his response. There may have been an internal eye roll on his part, but what he says is, "Whoa, you don't know what you are asking. Are you sure you want to head down this road with me?"

James and John clearly think Jesus's glory is going to be more glamorous than it will be. Or glamorous at all, really. They ask to sit at his right and his left. The next time that

phrase is used in Mark's gospel is at the crucifixion, for those hanged on his right and his left. Be careful what you wish for.

It seems a safe bet that James and John don't understand the suffering coming or they wouldn't ask to participate. Most commentators title this section of Mark something like, "The third passion prediction and misunderstanding by the disciples."<sup>1</sup> My New Testament professor likes to refer to these characters as the DUH-ciples.<sup>2</sup> A friend of mine calls them, "The knuckleheads for Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

What's intriguing to me is that Jesus refuses to make it quite so cut and dry. It's not so simple as the disciples missing the point yet again.

The disciples aren't entirely incorrect here. This is one of the few places in Mark's gospel that looks beyond the disciples' misunderstanding and acknowledges that they will, in fact, be faithful followers.<sup>4</sup> "You will drink this cup," Jesus says. "With the baptism with which I am baptized, you also will be baptized." With the help of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, these disciples will be the ones who carry the gospel beyond the empty tomb.<sup>5</sup> James, scripture tells us, will be martyred for his faith. The disciples aren't all wrong, even if they aren't all right either.

Feels familiar, doesn't it? Maybe to some degree, we are all kind of knuckleheads for Jesus. Maybe we faithful types are really just doing the best we can with what we understand in this messy, messy world. I wonder if that's what the disciples are supposed to teach us. That the way in which we follow Christ will always be messy. And that sometimes we'll get it right and sometimes not.

This story makes it pretty darn clear that greatness — from God's point of view — is found in God-like graciousness, generosity, and service, NOT in achieving positions of privilege and power that win accolades and certainly not in self-declaring entitlement to position of God's favor.<sup>6</sup> But what does this greatness look like put into practice?

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<sup>1</sup> The Discipleship Study Bible - NRSV. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. p. 1769.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Frances Taylor Gench for many things, not the least of which is her humor that keeps her biblical insights alive in my mind.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, Kathryn. In a paper on this text for The Well Lectionary Group, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Boring, Eugene and Fred Craddock. The People's New Testament Commentary. Westminster Press, 2010, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston.

What does it say about how we spend our money? Or how we make our money for that matter?

What does this greatness say about how we work to combat racism or sexism or classism?

What does it say about how we engage politics and what candidates we support? Or where we spend our time and energy?

Pursuing this God-like greatness is tricky. Because just like for the disciples of Jesus' day, nothing is pure the way we might wish. Not our motives, not the systems and structures in which we operate, not the people with whom we try to be in solidarity or those we try to serve. None of it is as pure and clear cut as we might like. It's naive to think it could be.

It seems to me the only things we know for sure about putting this kind of greatness into practice are:

- 1) It's messy.
- 2) A healthy dose of humility does us a lot of good.
- 3) We need one another to keep each other honest.

Community organizing teaches that we are to "act in the world as it is, on behalf of the world as it should be." Act in the world as it is, on behalf of the world as it should be.

I carry that with me because it helps me hold the tension of all the messiness and my attempts at faithfulness.

The truth is we can't solve the problem of homelessness in Georgetown, or the haunting plight of refugees, or the intersecting effects of poverty and racism on the girls at Excel Academy. These are wicked, wicked problems with complicated causes and controversial solutions.

But we can - we do - offer a meal to folks who are hungry.

We can - we do - use all the networks at our disposal to seek humanitarian parole for Afghanis stuck in constant terror and trauma in Kabul.

We can - we do - provide food and uniforms and the kind of financial assistance that can be the answer to a prayer for a family in Southeast DC.

We can act in *the world as it is* on behalf of *the world as it should be*.

And I hope we will also ask ourselves some harder questions —

How do decisions about development in our city decrease access to affordable housing? And what might we do about it?

Why is our immigration and asylum system so broken and why do we settle for cheap talking points from our politicians rather than demanding they fix the system?

Why are we willing to live in an economic system that rewards those of us who already have plenty and punishes those who don't have enough? Why are we more comfortable with charitable donations than living wages?

Please don't misunderstand me. Charitable work is life saving. It is commanded to us in scripture. We need to keep at it. Texts like this one in Mark's gospel push us further, I think, to the riskier work of turning things on their head. *Whoever wants to become great, the text says, must become slave of all. Jesus's glory is not what the disciples expect it to mean. It's not glorious in the eyes of the world. I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life.*

The vision of community Jesus is talking about turns things on their head. It doesn't just accept the status quo and do the best we can within it. He's asking us to turn it upside down. And that is messy work. Controversial work. Sacrificial work. Holy work.

Which is why, I suspect, Jesus is pretty clear about humility and the need for one another. *Drink the cup I drink. Be baptized in the baptism with which I am baptized. Become the servants of all.* This is a big ask of us.

Sometimes I wonder if we argue over things like "who is the greatest" or stick with partisan talking points about complicated issues in our society because they give us cover from actually admitting that these huge problems scare us. We can see their harm, we know we're out of sync with the gospel, and we don't know if we can solve them.<sup>7</sup> It's scary. As one preacher notes, fear breeds a desire for security.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes that manifests as doubling down on what we think we know. And sometimes it manifests in hubris. *Let us sit at your right hand and at your left, in glory.*

And that leads to what might be the most important thing Jesus says to us in these verses —

*Who will sit at my right or left is not mine to grant. But you will drink the cup I drink. You will be baptized in my baptism.*

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<sup>7</sup> Johnston.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, Charles. *Homiletical Perspective - Mark 10*. In Taylor, Barbara Brown and David Bartlett, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4*. Westminster Press, 2009, p. 191.

If I understand the text, what Jesus is saying to us is that we won't always be driven by our fears and need for security [or selfish ambition].... we will find it in ourselves to turn things upside down. To become not the greatest, but the servants of all. That we can be faithful disciples, even to the end.<sup>9</sup>

When I first read this story, I hear Jesus's words as a warning or an admonition against hubris and greed. I suspect they are. But maybe, more importantly, they are a **promise**.<sup>10</sup>

A promise that can sustain us as this messy, unjust world turns upside down.

A promise that in God's Promised Day, there will be no more mourning and pain and swords will be beaten into plowshares and the lion will lie with the lamb.

A promise that by the power of Christ's saving love, we can find the wherewithal to do the hard, messy, self-sacrificial things to live toward that Promised Day here and now — for the sake of ourselves and the sake of this world God loves so much.

May it be so.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Campell, p. 193.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.