

Hindsight
By Reverend Litton Logan
October 21, 2018

Scriptures:

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, "Grant 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 grant, 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; but 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."

Sermon:

I think it is always important for us to remember that Mark writes well after the events he reports. And given that; he has the interpretive advantage of hindsight, and hopefully so do we.

The author selected from his oral sources those stories and teachings of Jesus that he believed would address the needs of his community of faith. One of those needs was to encourage his Jewish Jesus believing community in Rome to stand firm in the faith, considering Nero's persecution of Christians in 64 C.E. and the tensions in Rome after the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 C.E. These concerns and anxieties were compounded by the delay of Jesus' return to establish the kingdom of God on earth. We also gather that within Mark's community there may have been some elitism that was upsetting the harmony and well-being of the community.

In Mark, chapter 8, we hear Peter's pre-Easter statement confessing Jesus to be the Anointed One of God, but in so doing, Mark would later make it obvious to his post-Easter audience that Peter didn't really understand the true nature or purposes of Jesus. In our text today, we see two more pre-Easter members of the "inner circle," revealing that they didn't understand the nature of the kingdom of God to come.

Jesus, in his teachings about the kingdom of God, turned the Ancient Near Eastern world's thinking about greatness and honor upside down by telling his disciples to abandon their cultural playing fields of seeking and protecting their honor and adopting a servant-slave posture in their relationships within his surrogate family.

Yet, in defense of these two disciples, given their expectation that the kingdom was coming very soon, Jesus' group needed a chain of command and the Sons of Thunder, as these two brothers were known, wanted key honorific positions in that chain of command. I mention that in Luke's Gospel that this story is omitted altogether, and in Matthew it is James and John's mother who make the request of Jesus. (I mean, any chance you get blame a woman.)

It is clear from Mark's Gospel that the early church was still struggling to understand God's presence and power at work in Jesus as the Christ in light of his death. To my mind, I think Mark tells this story about James and John as his way of helping those early believers and concomitantly the Church across the ages to understand the possible costs of discipleship until Jesus' return. This is so because at the time of Mark's writing James had already been martyred.

In answer to some of the questions and concerns about the timing of Jesus' return, Mark in chapter 13 indicates that the time is imminent. The Gospel of Matthew says the kingdom's coming is not as soon as expected because there must be time to evangelize the lost sheep of Israel scattered about the Mediterranean world. Therefore, the followers of Jesus must take up their crosses. Luke, in light of Jesus' delay and his attempts to normalize relationships with the Roman powers that be, says the kingdom is coming, but it is so far out in the future as to be inconsequential for his community of faith. Therefore, Jesus' followers must take up their crosses "daily". (Luke 9:23).

It is obvious from these two disciples' petition that they anticipated Jesus coming into his glory as soon as they arrived in Jerusalem. Jesus asked these men if they thought they could pay the price he must pay for places of honor in the kingdom to come, considering what he has told them would happen to him once he arrived in Jerusalem. And we hear the disciples' thoughtless and naïve declaration - "We are able!" To Mark's audience and to us, Jesus' question is rhetorical, since they and we know the apostles abandoned Jesus during his crucifixion.

As I was researching and thinking about discipleship, its costs and sacrifices, I thought of the story of Fred and his wife Edna, who went to the Minnesota state fair every year. Every year Fred would say, "Edna, I'd like to take a ride in that there old bi-plane." And every year Edna would say, "I know Fred, but that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars."

One-year Fred and Edna went to the fair and Fred said, "Edna, I'm 75 years old. If I don't ride that airplane this year, I may never get another chance." Edna replied, "Fred that airplane ride costs ten dollars, and ten dollars is ten dollars."

The pilot overheard Fred and Edna and said, "Folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take you both up for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say one word, I won't charge you, but if you say one word it's ten dollars." Fred and Edna agreed and up they go.

The pilot does all kinds of twists and turns, rolls and dives, but not a word is heard. He does all his aerobatic tricks over again, but still not a word. They land, and the pilot turns to Fred, "By golly, I did everything I could to get you to yell out, but you didn't." Fred replied, "Well, I was gonna say something when Edna fell out, but ten dollars is after all ten dollars."

Let us hear Mark speaking to his post-Easter audience and to the Church across the years when Jesus said to these disciples, "Come to think of it, your allotment, your cup in this matter and its consequences will, in truth, be like mine. However, as to awarding the places of honor you request, that's not in my purview."

So, for followers of Jesus, no matter what they give up, what they do or don't do by their reckoning, positions in the kingdom are not Jesus' to give. Mark is making a point that often slips into the background, when people, even with hindsight, read the gospels. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as God's broker in the matter of divine-human restoration and salvation. God and God alone saves, rewards, and awards according to God's understandings.

In addition, Mark understood, although he did not develop his theme in any depth, that Jesus in death became a ransom for many. Mark may not have needed to develop his theory of ransom because it was a pervasive understanding in his community or given his sense of the imminent return of Jesus, no further explanation or development would have been necessary. Therefore, Mark saw Jesus as having such honor status as God's divine broker that he could offer

himself up as a ransom to gain the release of lesser persons; persons who are either held in sin-captivity by either Satan or under the threat of divine retribution from God.

It is obvious in James' and John's request of Jesus that they have in mind the hierarchical models of power, dominance, and honor in the kingdom of God that were common in the Ancient Near East and especially in the Roman Empire. Jesus in response defined the relational dynamics for his surrogate family as he looked toward the coming kingdom. Jesus understood that those who are servants (δῆακονορ) to others and serve as would a slave (δοϋλορ); that is, as one owned by another, who has no say in their life and definitely no expectation of recognition or reward, shall be the greatest and recognized by God; but remember, God has the final word on such things.

James' and John's entreaty of Jesus evoked a response in the other disciples that lead to the cardinal sin in their culture of limited goods and resources, including limited honor. That sin was and is envy, seen as the source of all sins. The other disciples became very upset with these two and their elitist request, which fostered suspicion and discord, as such things must have done in Mark's church.

The author of Mark, even looking through the lenses of Calvary, Easter, and the martyrdom of many of the Apostles and other followers of Jesus, addressed a situation that was common to the early Christians and for us today; which is, people following Jesus without a clear understanding of the demands and responsibilities of discipleship, the true nature of Christ-likeness, or the kingdom of God.

To this end, I think it is obvious that each follower of Jesus must ask the question: Are we able to live for God's will in our lives as Christ did and as many of those early apostles no matter what? Are we willing and able to become servant-slaves, within God's will?

Are we, as servant-slaves, willing to go to Jerusalem; that is, the centers of religious, political, and economic power to proclaim God's ways of love and to press God's case for moral and ethical behaviors? Given all our modern freedoms, resources, and our now universal understanding of the gospel couples with Jesus' example, "Are We Able" to pay the prices of discipleship and to welcome and support all who come in search of God's grace and healing presence in the Christ? Finally, and even more personally, are we, as followers of Jesus, willing to undertake daily an interior Jerusalem journey to compare our own attitudes and values against Jesus' teachings?

It is important for Christians to remember Jesus was not crucified for saying, "Consider the lilies of the field and how they grow," but because he called people, the common and elite alike, to turn from either passively participating in or actively exploiting and profaning his Father's will and name.

In closing, I want to reiterate Mark's understanding of Jesus' death on the cross as a ransom for "many." A ransom, as you know, is the amount of wealth or other valuables given to a captor or kidnapper. In Mark's Gospel, we see the Holy One of God, God's broker of salvation, being offered up as a ransom for many out of his loyalty and devotion to God. Although the "many" is not identified here in Mark, one may safely assume it originally referred to the Jews, who were historically to be the primary citizens and benefactors of the kingdom of God. However, across the ages under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus have come to understand the "many" as all of humanity held captive to demonic forces.

These demonic forces are seen clearly in humankind's deep and all-pervasive reactions to the existential fear and anxiety over things we can't know or control. This fear gives rise to humanity's envy of God's sovereignty and power - Adam and Eve's sin, and the ends thereof are death and destruction.

In Christ, the believer is freed from the damning and demanding drive of human fear and anxiety to know and find answers for all of life's unknowns, the "unknowables", and "ultimates" from within themselves and the world. In the realization of the truths of God in Christ, we may commit all those things beyond our control or knowing to God's care and keeping because God is the Sovereign of all life and death.

Once such truths become the truths of a person's life, they will have no illusions about who they are, what they need, and who is the answer to their deepest fears. Now freed, no longer captive to the consequences of their lower, fearful natures, they are free to lose themselves in God's will, no matter the cost or where it leads. When a person does this, life no longer revolves around their fears, but rotates instead around their role as divine servant-slaves, as they labor for God and others.

The absolute comfort and power of our faith comes to us when we can truly say and comprehend, *thy kingdom come, thy will be done*; not my will be done, not my rewards come; but Lord, help me serve and care for those whom you love as I live my life in the face of all its uncertainties against the backdrop of the certainty of death.

All this having been said, let us not be too hard on these two disciples and their misunderstandings today. How many times have we openly or secretly basked in our prideful assumptions as Christians and thought to judge and lord it over others only to find ourselves on another day living in fear, despair, and compromise. I speak of those who may have succumbed to their lesser selves, their fears, despair, or other forces.

How many times have we longed for some super-confirmation of our faith and standing in God's will and work? "Lord give me a sign, let me know I am right, and others are wrong." How often have we had unrealistic expectations of Jesus in this world or the kingdom to come? Yet, all this begs the question: are we able to look beyond our ways of thinking and trust God in all matters ultimate, no matter what the costs? Are we able to give up seeking power in and over life in the "self" alone and live as Christ-determined people? And, finally, knowing in hindsight what we now know, are we still willing to go with Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem?

Over the years in our faith journeys, we've each had to struggle with some or all of these questions numerous times, haven't we? In some of our struggles, we have found answers and solutions and sometimes not. Consequently, we've just had to live with the anxiety of not knowing and its uncertainty. We have often felt alone and abandoned by God as did Jesus and his disciples. However, God nonetheless stepped out the other side with us, having sustained us and brought us through whatever our struggles, doubts, and despairs.

So, even with my hindsight, I think I am going to try to continue on toward Jerusalem with no promises of prominence all the while praying for the power not to abandon God's claim on my life until the Christ returns or I go to meet him. What about you?

Bibliography

Levine, Amy-Jill, March Avi Brettler. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017.

Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd Ed. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2003.

Perkins, Pheme. *The Letter Interpreter's Bible. to the Ephesians, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. XI of the New Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994, online, Ministry Matters.com.

Stern, David H. *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Clarksville, Maryland, 1992, Kindle Edition.