

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him and said, “Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask.”

³⁶He said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?”

³⁷They said to him, “Promise that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory.”

³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with?”

³⁹“We can,” they replied.

Jesus told them, “You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with. ⁴⁰But to sit at my right or at my left is not for me to give; rather, these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they were angry with James and John.

⁴²Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³But that is not the way it is to be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The Way to True Greatness

I.

Pick up your toys; clean your room; get your homework done. Parents get tired of telling their children the same thing over and over. Again and again and *again* they need the same directions.

A wife tells her husband the things he does that annoy her, and the husband tells his wife the things *she* does that bother him. The same things get revisited again and again and *again*. At work, the boss has to tell the same employees about their poor attitudes and work habits again and again and *again*. Employees who are trying to make a difference for their employers make the same suggestions for improvement again and again and *again*, but what they say seems to fall on deaf ears.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Before the verses that serve as today's Gospel reading we hear: “He took the Twelve aside again and began to tell them what was going to happen to him” (Mark 10:32, EHV). “Again” is an important word. This wasn't the first time. During his entire earthly ministry Jesus had given hints to his followers about what would happen to him as Messiah.

It was urgent now. This would be his last visit to Jerusalem. They hadn't picked up on the things he had said in the past, so during *this* journey he told them straight out. They still hadn't gotten it. *Again* he had to tell them. This would make the third time he was so direct. “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the experts in the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴They will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again” (Mark 10:33-34, EHV).

You know your history of Jesus' passion. Though his explanation of what was to come is reported concisely, it is complete, isn't it? No beating around the bush. No prevaricating. No hyperbole. No figures of speech of any kind. This was exactly what was going to happen. Jesus, though totally innocent of any crime—of any *sin* at all—was about to be treated with shocking brutality and be put to death in a horrific way.

Children. Spouses. Employees or employers. Again and again and *again* they have to be told. Again and again and *again* what has been said does not seem to be retained.

II.

“He took the Twelve aside again...” (Mark 10:32, EHV). Jesus had many followers. You could

call this group that was labeled the “Twelve” as a sort-of inner circle. There was another group that was the inner circle of the inner circle. These were the three that regularly were broken off by Jesus to take to special places. The Mount of Transfiguration comes to mind. When he would go off from the others to pray in Gethsemane, these three went with him further than the rest. It was a close-knit group: Peter, James, and John.

Of that inner-inner circle, Peter is the one who always gets singled out for bone-headed moves—for being brash and bold. With good reason. Recently we saw Peter being quick to declare Jesus to be the Promised One of God, but then having to be called Satan when he tried to deter Jesus for fulfilling God’s promises. Peter’s rash assertions would bite him yet again in the coming days.

But was Peter the only one who was rash and bold? James and John were guilty, too. Early in Mark’s gospel he listed the names of all the disciples. When he came to these two, he wrote: “James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the nickname Boanerges, which means ‘Sons of Thunder’” (Mark 3:17, EHV). They got this nickname because they once asked Jesus if they shouldn’t call down fire from heaven to destroy a village that didn’t welcome him.

On this occasion: “James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him and said, ‘Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask...’³⁷ Promise that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:35, 37 EHV).

Six weeks ago we listened to another Gospel reading and another sermon in which the disciples were jockeying for position as they walked along the road. They argued about which would be the greatest, and what cabinet positions each might hold when he finally set up his kingdom.

None of us could fault Jesus if he were just to heave a great sigh and ask: “Again? I just explained this to you!” After all, while it has been six weeks for us, it was just a few *days* since he had corrected them about this.

James and John aren’t alone. Again and again and again we jockey for position in God’s kingdom, looking to get more glory than others in one way or another. Again and again and again we look at God’s law as something only designed to show us the right way to live and how to get closer to God. Again and again and again we need to be reminded that we are incapable of making ourselves right with God. Again and again and again we succumb to the idea that God should shower us with physical blessings because of all the years we have hung in there with Jesus; he *owes* us.

III.

“But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with?’” (Mark 10:38, EHV). By way of answer, Jesus offers a riddle. “Can you handle the kind of difficult experience and suffering I am about to endure?” he asks.

It was only moments before that Jesus had explained the cup and baptism he would have to endure. “The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the experts in the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴They will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again” (Mark 10:33-34, EHV).

The cup was unpleasant. Jesus would even ask the Heavenly Father: “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36, EHV). God’s will was that Jesus drink the cup of suffering and death for the sins of the world to the very dregs. Every last bit of suffering must be endured. The entire price had to be paid in full. Without the sacrifice of Jesus’ perfect life, the sins of the world would remain unpaid and every man, woman, and child would be condemned to an eternity in hell with Satan.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45, EHV). The most intense cup imaginable was waiting for Jesus at Jerusalem. Yet he did not shrink from it. He stretched out his arms, tipped back the cup of

suffering, and died. “It is finished,” he cried out from the cross. That phrase is one word in Greek—the very word used to mark a bill of sale “paid in full.” Jesus paid in full the price the Heavenly Father demanded to bring us to heaven.

IV.

“Jesus told them, ‘You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with.’⁴⁰ But to sit at my right or at my left is not for me to give; rather, these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared” (Mark 10:39-40, EHV). According to his human nature, Jesus was not authorized to hand out positions. The right and left positions in the kingdom are not for him to fill or for disciples to worry about.

Does the first part of Jesus’ answer to them seem ominous to you? “You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with.”

James and John had asked for glory. While they were hoping for and expecting the praise of the crowds, what they would get would be ridicule. What they wanted was important positions in Jesus’ cabinet, but what they would get would be the kind of treatment Jesus got: to be spit on and mocked and handed over and killed. They would get glory, but not the kind they were thinking of, and not at the time they were thinking.

Did you ever wonder why you don’t hear much about James after Jesus’ ascension into heaven? James was the first of the inner circle called the Twelve to be martyred—to be killed for his faith. John only became more prominent as the memory of his brother faded. While John was the last of the Twelve to die, he was banished to the island of Patmos—sentenced to die in exile, as he put it: “...because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus” (Revelation 1:9, EHV). John was exiled for the crime of being a Christian.

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.’⁴³ But that is not the way it is to be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44, EHV).

And so it is to this day. Christians are to see service to the Lord and service to their fellow believers as the highest calling.

Today is our October Voters’ meeting. Consider service to the Lord. If you are being elected to a position on one of the boards of Holy Trinity, consider it an honor to serve, rather than a burden. Do your best to serve with integrity and for the good of the little piece of the Lord’s kingdom we find ourselves in here in this congregation. If you are elected by the Ladies’ Guild to a position there, consider that an honor, too. As the Board of Stewardship begins to search for members to help serve on the building committee as we continue to explore changes to our facility, volunteer to be a part of it, that you might offer yourself in service to the Lord in that way.

Do not look at any of these positions as positions of glory, but positions of service. I pray that none of us ever have to experience exile or execution for faith in Jesus, but even if that comes, pray to the Lord of the church that he would give you strength to endure, for your final glory will be waiting for you in heaven.

May God bless you as you drink whatever cup he has given you in service to Christ’s kingdom. Amen.