

“Are We Able?”
 Rev. Frank Allen
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee

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Mark 10:35-45

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.” **36** And he 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.” **38** 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?” **39** 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; **40** 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 not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

THE DEMAND

Did your child ever say something like this to you?
 “Daddy I love you so much.”
 You’re heart melts.

And then the child says, “Will you do whatever I ask?”
 At that point your affection becomes infected with suspicion. And you say,

“Well, sweetheart, it depends upon what you want me to do.”

Many of us are familiar with a conversation like that.
And it sort of reminds me of how our lesson for today begins.

You'll remember that in last week's lesson Peter reminded Jesus that they had left everything to follow him. In this week's lesson two disciples act like this sacrifice should be rewarded in a very specific way.

James and John come to Jesus and make a demand.
"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

And like a good Father Jesus answered their demand with a cautious question,

"Exactly what do you want me to do for you?"

James and John wanted to be on Jesus' right and left in glory.

Jesus replied,

"Are you able to do this?
Can you bear the responsibility?
Can you make the necessary sacrifices?"

James and John were quick to answer,

"We are able.

We have the right stuff Jesus."

THE REST OF THE STORY

Sadly, we know the rest of the story.

Their bravado was not up to the painful reality of the cross.

When push came to shove, they didn't have the right stuff.

They failed miserably.

They weren't able.

When Jesus was arrested by the political and religious authorities, James and John, the so-called “Sons of Thunder,” quietly disappeared into the night.

They were no different than the other frightened disciples on the night in which he was betrayed.

And who was on Jesus’ right and left in “glory”?
Two thieves.

They were crucified alongside Jesus.

You see, Jesus’ “glory” was the glory of the cross.
It was not the kingdom that the disciples expected.

GLORY OVER SACRIFICE

Jesus told James and John in our lesson for today, “You don’t know what you are asking.”

When you read the gospel of Mark you wonder how James and John could have asked such a thoughtless and self serving question.

In our Scripture lessons these past few weeks Jesus says it over and over again. The Kingdom of God is about sacrifice and service. Those who follow Jesus must deny themselves and take up a cross.

But, the disciples never get it.
Were the disciples really that dense?
One commentator said that we call the disciples the “duh- ciples!”

But, the disciples weren’t intellectually challenged.
They didn’t get it because they were dumb.

The disciples had trouble listening to Jesus because, like us, they had selective hearing.

The predictions of Jesus’ death and resurrection were dire, and he repeated them several times. But, we also remember that just a few chapters

back Mark tells us about how James and John were with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration.

Maybe the glory of that moment overshadowed the predictions of Jesus' passion. They saw the glory but they forgot the voice from the heavenly cloud telling them to listen to Jesus.

We can understand.

If we had our druthers, we too would like to go from glory to glory.

We're not all that different from James and John.

The questions we ask Jesus often betray a willful (or maybe I should say wistful) misunderstanding of the Kingdom of God.

We don't know what we are asking.

Or as the Bible might put it,

"We don't have ears to hear."

ARE WE ABLE?

Today, Jesus asks us, "Are you able?"
Do you have the right stuff to be my disciple?

And like James and John we want to respond almost immediately, "We are able."

But, are we?
Are we able?

I remember a hymn from my youth. The first line went, "Are you able saith the Master to be crucified with me?" The refrain went, "Lord, we are able."

I looked up the history of this hymn and found that the person who wrote this hymn based it on our passage for today.

James and John said, "We are able."

And the hymn writer wanted young people in the church to say the same thing.

The hymn became very popular.

Young people were singing at camps and conferences in the early 20th century, "Lord, we are able."

This can do attitude matched the American spirit.

There was only one problem.

The hymn wasn't true to the message of Scripture.

WE AREN'T ABLE

They weren't able, and we aren't able.

That hymn takes this passage and turns it on its head.

We are not called to be like James and John.

Those disciples got it wrong.

We are called to follow Jesus.

Let's not be too hard on the sons of Zebedee.

We are still asking the wrong questions when it comes to the Kingdom of God.

Our questions and our actions often betray the fact that we too are not willing to follow Jesus.

Instead, we want Jesus to sanctify our own ideas about power and privilege. And, because he loves us, Jesus still refuses to do it.

This shouldn't surprise us.

The Bible is very clear about this.

We can't follow Jesus ... at least on our own. Like James and John, we don't have what it takes.

The cup Jesus speaks about is the cup of sacrifice and suffering. We don't want to drink that cup.

We would prefer the cup of self-fulfillment.

The baptism Jesus speaks about is the process of dying to the old way of life so that we can walk with him in a new way. But, we like the old way just fine. We don't want to be baptized with a new way.

Our problem with Jesus is not a matter of understanding. It's a matter of will. "Are you able saith the Master to be crucified with me?"

Now that you've clarified the question, Jesus our honest answer is "no." We're not able.

But, our passage for today suggests that eventually this would change.

James and John were finally able to follow Jesus. They would drink the cup that Jesus drank. They would be baptized with his baptism.

What made the difference?
What turned them around?

THE CUP

They weren't able to do it because they were the "sons of thunder," guys who were full of moxie.

They weren't able to do it because they were ambitious and clever enough to ask for a position of power when the other disciples weren't around.

James and John were finally able to follow Jesus because they drank the cup that he drank, the cup of forgiveness and salvation.

Jesus told them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized ..."

What was that cup?
We talk about it every month.

"On the same night in which he was betrayed" Jesus took the cup and gave it to his disciples saying, "This is my blood which is shed for you. Drink all of you of it."

When you drink the cup of salvation on the night of betrayal, the world changes. Our petty sense of entitlement is exposed for what it is.

In the presence of blood shed...for us, and body broken... for us, how can we proclaim a kingdom based upon power and personal privilege?

We can't.

What Jesus told Pilate at his trial is still true.
His kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom transforms the world.

His kingdom transforms our world.

SON OF MAN

When the other disciples finally woke up and heard what James and John were asking, they were as mad as a wet hornet. They weren't mad at what James and John asked. They were mad that they didn't think to ask first!

Jesus used this as yet another teachable moment concerning the kingdom of God. He called the gang together and said,

"You know how the world works. These heathen rulers don't care about their people. They are tyrants who just want to stay in power at any price.

But, the way to fight these tyrants is not to be like them. You have to show the world another way.

Instead of lording it over others, you have to serve them. If you want to be truly great, you have to put yourself last and be the servant of all."

And why should the disciples be that way?

Because Jesus is that way. He said, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The disciples want to call Jesus Messiah, the one who would come to establish a political kingdom backed up by the power of God.

But, when Jesus refers to himself he often uses a different title. He calls himself the Son of Man. This title is used throughout all the gospels. What does it mean?

I think that Jesus used this title to highlight the unique nature of his kingdom.

His kingdom was not about lording it over anybody.

His kingdom was about serving and lifting up those who were on the bottom of society. His kingdom was about touching the untouchable and protecting those who are most vulnerable.

He was the Son of Man.

He shows us what it means to be truly human.

He shows us what God meant for us to be.

IMITATING THE INCARNATION

The Apostle Paul provides a good interpretation of this passage in his letter to the Philippians. He says that we shouldn't do anything out of selfish ambition but instead "out of humility regard others better than yourselves."

If you want to talk about a statement that is out of touch with our competitive society ... this is it!

But, don't misunderstand.

This doesn't mean that we are to be doormats.

It means that we are to be humble servants because we are imitating the life of Jesus.

In a memorable phrase, one commentator referred to this as "imitating the incarnation."

Jesus left the throne of heaven and called himself the Son of Man. He humbled himself even to the point of dying on a cross.

However you interpret the meaning of the cross, one thing is sure: the cross does not leave any room for pride and ambition.

The cross is all about service and sacrifice.

In our lesson for today, Jesus put it this way, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

That word “ransom” is key in this passage.

If a loved one is kidnapped we will pay any price to get them back.

God loved the world so much that he gave his Son as a ransom.

Jesus paid the price so that we might know forgiveness.

NOTHING TO PROVE

And in light of that forgiveness we are freed from guilt in order to live a life filled with joy. We don't have to prove anything to anyone. Instead, we serve others out of a profound sense of gratitude.

The disciples had a hard time accepting this radical vision of God's kingdom. They still thought that they had to prove something to themselves and others. That's why James and John made their request.

And down through the ages the Christian community has made the same mistake.

In every age there has been a “James” or a “John” who wanted to turn the teachings of Jesus upside down. In every age there has been someone who wanted to rewrite the history of the church and make Christianity into just another way to gain power and privilege.

But, in the long run, it was the message of the cross that prevented this view from prevailing.

Pride and privilege cannot survive in those who drink the cup of salvation. Pride and privilege cannot survive in those who are baptized and saved by grace through faith.

Each generation must learn this lesson.

Each generation must learn to oppose those false prophets who want to make Christianity into something that it is not.

Following Jesus is not a way to get rich or succeed or guarantee protection for all that we love. We cannot use the name of Jesus to gain power and prestige.

Remember.
Jesus does not baptize what we love already.

We are baptized by Jesus.
We are passive recipients of (as the hymn puts it) a “marvelous grace that is greater than all our sin”.

ABLE IN HIM

My sermon title this morning is a question.
“Are we able?”

In other words, are we able to follow Jesus on our own? The answer is no. We are not able to drink the cup that he drinks. We are not able to be baptized with his baptism.

But, remember last week’s lesson.
What is impossible with human beings is possible with God. With God all things are possible.

A friend has an email address that makes this point.
His email address is “able in him at [gmail.com](mailto:able.in.him@gmail.com).”

That’s the right address for all of us.

We aren’t able, but by the grace of God we are able in him.

Henri Nouwen wrote,

“The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led.”

Religion can be fertile soil for blind ambition.

Those of us who sit near the Master are always tempted to do what we want instead of asking Jesus what he wants of us.

Some of the most dastardly deeds have been done by those who have claimed to have been God's right hand man.

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The other 10 disciples were angry with James and John for seeking a position of power and privilege. We assume that their anger was because they themselves wanted that power. Their anger wasn't a very helpful response.

But, I do think there is a role for the critique of other disciples in the kingdom of God.

All of us need to be suspicious of our motives. Like James and John we are tempted to look at the kingdom in the wrong way. How can we avoid that pitfall?

One way to avoid that pitfall is to hold one another accountable. We remind each other of our unique calling in Christ Jesus.

We encourage one another when tempted.
We remember that we are different from the world

That's why we have creeds and confessions in the church.
They form a common understanding of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus.
They guide our life together.

They prevent us from baptizing the ways of the world.

Several weeks ago I had the privilege of baptizing my grandson at Hope Presbyterian Church. Before we baptized him we recited the Apostle's Creed. And I said a few words about the meaning of baptism.

I said the promises of God are for us and for our children.

But, how can we know the promises of God?

We teach those promises to God's children. We teach the basics of the Christian faith in word and deed to all God's people.

This is a lifelong process for all of us.
Together we drink the cup of salvation and are baptized into the way of Christ.

And in him we are able.

Amen.