

Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

The Request of James and John

(Mt 20.20—28)

³⁵ 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 nations 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 bond-servant 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.”

All God's Children

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Mark 10:35-45*

What a wonderful story this is! Here we are steps away from Jesus' destiny in Jerusalem. Three times Jesus has told his disciples what awaits him there. And yet, as so many times before, Jesus' disciples are grabbing for the gold. James and John want Jesus to promise them seats at his right and left in glory. Jesus' disciples believe that they have paid their dues. They have given up family and home to follow Jesus. It seems now to have been a calculated decision. Give up a little now but get glory when it really counts. It's a theme identical to last week's, where we met the rich young man who wanted to know if his life lived in total obedience was enough to get him eternal life. It's like that scene near the end of the movie "Field of Dreams." Ray Kinsella has plowed his corn field under. He's built a baseball stadium in the middle of nowhere. He watches imaginary baseball players play. He's a laughing stock in the community. His wife worries about him. His banker comes after the farm. But Ray persists. Ray has listened to a mysterious voice and followed it. And finally his judgement is vindicated. Everyone sees what he sees. But then, at an important point in the movie, after Rasy has been vindicated, when Ray thinks he is being left out of the pay-off, when he isn't invited into the corn with the disappearing ballplayers, Ray wants to know, "What's in it for me?" Here we are in this morning's story, just before Jericho, just before the final ascent into Jerusalem, after a year-long traveling seminar of twelve students that should have taught them better, and James and John are finally motivated by what's in it for them.

Jesus says, "Sitting next to me? You don't know what you are asking." Jesus means a couple of important things by that. James' and John's very question reveals that, one, they still think the path of discipleship is all about getting a reward in glory, and, two, they have not yet grasped that the path of discipleship is fraught with a bitter cup and a difficult baptism. That is, the disciples don't yet grasp that discipleship is about a way of life, and that way of life isn't always a bed of roses.

Now, it isn't immediately obvious why one should sign on for life of discipleship when the marketing message says the cup you drink will be bitter. Maybe Jesus should have hired some modern political operatives to help spin his message. Maybe he should have held some focus groups and test-marketed a few advertisements. Maybe he should have put together a few more effective sound bytes than, "Follow me and you'll drink from a bitter cup." Maybe. But maybe not. Maybe it's better, dare I say refreshing, to meet an honest politician. Jesus keeps trying to make sure that people know what they are signing on for.

And what is that? What are they signing on for, and why is it a bitter cup? What's soon to come in Jerusalem is one answer. Rejection, not coronation. But this morning's passage gives us a deeper and more fulsome description.

Jesus tells John and James that if they continue to follow him they will drink a cup like his and be baptized with a baptism like is. He then addresses all twelve of the disciples and

explains what he means. Among the nations, in the world, in the normal way the world does business, in the world according to Caesar, to be a ruler is lord it over everyone. It is to have power. It is to have privilege. It is to be considered great. It is to be a tyrant. Why, it's even the privilege of good seats, James and John. But among my disciples, among you, Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be bond-servant of all."

We need to unpack this language a bit. We don't like the language of being a servant. Even worse is the language of slavery, which I have translated as bond-servant. We have become socially aware of the class and privilege problems of servants and masters. The long and problematic history of sexism and gender roles make us wary of saying that serving another is the model and basis for discipleship. Our country's history makes language of slavery even more unacceptable. But think for a minute what Jesus is saying here. He isn't talking about a world according to Caesar in which Christians are to take on the roles of service and slavery to privilege and power. He is talking about a world, a community, a church, in which, rather than lord it over one another, we function out of care for one another. We don't become servant so that the ones we serve can lord it over us. We become servants among servants in a context in which no one seeks lord it over another. The Greek meaning of slave or bond-servant in this text is meant to convey a sense of humble and freely-given service to one another. That's what Jesus is talking about. And I can tell you this, the subversive power of such a community drives Caesar and Herod and most rulers crazy. And that's why Jesus and his disciples sometimes find themselves drinking from a bitter cup.

But good friends, the bitter cup is not the most important aspect of becoming a disciple, and it's not point of it at all. The point of becoming a disciple is to create, against the grain, communities modeled on Jesus, who he was and what he taught. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus said, do this, build communities this way, and you will see dawning the kingdom of God. And what about seats in glory? Jesus says, hey, I don't from glory. Don't even worry about that. His bigger point is this, if you build communities of leadership based on humble service, you won't care much obtaining the good seats. Your joy will be greater than any that can come from prestige and lording it over others. And that joy, that joy is glimpse of what awaits us.

*** One of the things I love about Jesus is that he's willing to work with some pretty dodgy material: James and John, you and me. He tells James and John, right at the moment that they have demonstrated minimal understanding, "You will drink the cup I drink." That is, he says to them, "you are my disciples." They're unfinished. They're a work in progress. They're hard-headed and stiff-necked, but Jesus claims them, and he puts them to work for the kingdom of God.

The point is that he chooses you, and me, and Tom Clough, he chooses everyone in this room, Margaret, Barbara, Christine, Bob, Vinny, Sally, Leona, Bill, everyone here, I can't call you all by name, but if I could I would. Jesus chooses everyone of us even though not one of us is finished. Say it with me. We're not finished yet. But we are disciples of Jesus.

That's the truth of it good friends. That's what we're here to celebrate on this glorious day when we dedicate this building and ministry, and begin again, a new community in this community. Everyone of us is a disciple of Jesus. Paul says we need us all. We are all members of the one body, and the body needs every finger, every toe, every hair on the head, every one of

us. Bill Staines says it in his wonderful song, that I wish I had the voice to sing to you:
“All God's creatures got a place in the choir.

Some sing lower, some sing higher,

Some sing out loud on the telephone wire,

Some just clap their hand, their paws, or anything they got now.”

See that, there's even a place for me. I can't sing a lick but I can clap my paws now.

All God's children got a place in the choir. And this isn't just a catchy tune. It's not just a metaphor of body parts that the apostle Paul borrowed from Greek culture. It's the radical truth of a discipleship community. Let's make this church the exciting discipleship community it can be. Let's fill it with reading groups and study groups that help us build our faith and develop our spiritual center. Let us fill our worship with word and music that lift the soul and challenge us to become better disciples. Let us disciple our adults and our young people in Sunday School, in youth groups, in retreats and in service projects. Let us reach out into the community and the world in service and compassion. And let us learn that in every one of these activities as disciples we are no greater than those we serve, and that indeed, service will always move in two directions. For who of us has taught a child, or led a Bible study, or served at the Outdoor Church and has not realized that we have been served by those we have thought we were serving?

The invitation is open. Drink the cup, live the baptism of discipleship. We've got a job for every one of you. Not some old dusty job sitting on a committee. In fact, I want to get rid of every committee that subtracts from our sense of discipleship. I want you to think about how you want to be a disciple in this place, how you want to serve, what you want to bring of yourself to humble service to the church, to the world and to Christ.

Say it again with me. We're not finished yet. But we are disciples of Jesus.

Yes you are. Amen and amen.