

## “Bound By Love”

Mark 10: 35-45

This is one of those texts in the Bible. You know, those texts which seem so easy yet are so difficult to live out in our lives as disciples. You know one of those texts where we can simply say, “Well, at least we aren’t like those two disciples. They really stepped in it this time. We would never do anything like that. We know exactly who Jesus is. We know exactly what Jesus came to do. We know exactly how we would have handled that situation”. It’s amazing what 2000 years will do to our perspective, isn’t it?

This is one of those texts which gets under our skin, especially when we realize that Mark is not talking to the disciples. He is talking to his readers with a clear message about who we are as disciples of Christ and how we are to live out our calling as such. In this text, Mark is holding up a mirror, confronting us with our arrogance, pointing out that as insiders, we should know better. This is one of those texts which challenges us to rethink and redefine what it means to be a disciple of Christ, showing us again, that it is not about holding places of honor. Rather being a servant means engaging in the often frustrating, and thankless work of the Kingdom of God, work which was modeled to us, modeled for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

This conversation about rethinking and redefining what it means to be a servant of Jesus Christ must be in the air because Paul Prather wrote a fascinating article this week about just that. I'm not going to go into detail about the article. Many of you are fans of his writing and have probably read the article already. But his basic premise is that a big chunk of our Bible doesn't play well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially the parts about submitting to others, especially the parts about calling us to be servants to and for others.

Prather suggests that this is more than "going along and getting along so that we can keep the peace". Rather, when Jesus, when Paul, when Peter, when any of the disciples speak or use this language of servanthood, they were addressing an ideal which states a deeper freedom can result if we choose to deny our believed supreme importance over others, that "if we, with full knowledge of what we are doing, bless the [unlovable], bless the unlovely, then paradoxically we become masters....of our own soul sucking ego".

Again as I read this article, I cynically thought to myself, "Yeah, sounds great on paper but in practice...impossible." But even in my grumbling, I wondered if there wasn't something there. After all, people who are way smarter than me, and who are way more mature spiritually than me, seemed to have found peace and wisdom from this ideal of letting go of the ego. And more importantly,

all four gospels contain in some form or another, contain this story of James and John requesting places of honor when Jesus comes into his Kingdom.

When this happens, this is usually a clue to us as people of faith that we had better pay attention. Because it's rare that we come upon a story all four Gospels agree upon. So what are we missing when we read this story?

I think the first piece which we ignore is when Jesus is talking about being a servant first, he is not talking in a sense of a feel good, sappy, do a good deed so we can feel better about ourselves type of thing. This conversation surrounding servanthood follows the third and final prediction of the passion, which sets the context for the conversation, like all the times before.

In the Gospel of Mark, each time, Jesus offers up these predications of the passion, somehow, someway, it always circles back to how the Kingdom of God doesn't play by our rules, how it doesn't play by our expectations, how the Kingdom of God surprises us and humbles us with grace. And each and every time, Jesus makes these predictions about the passion and how it relates to the Kingdom of God, the disciples always miss the point.

The first passion predication comes right after Peter gets something right for a change. Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah but before he can claim his gold star, he takes it one step too far. Jesus surprised by Peter's answer, says

“You’re right” and then goes on to say how the Son of Man will be turned over, killed, buried and then on the three day, will rise again.” Peter immediately says, “Jesus, I think you got it wrong. When I said you were the Messiah, I meant that you were going to ride into Jerusalem, and kick out the Romans, so that we can be in charge. That’s who we want you to be.” To which Jesus rebukes Peter, tells him to Get Behind me, Satan! (At least we’ve got that going for us right? When we think we are getting everything wrong, at least we know Jesus has never called us Satan. Others may have but never Jesus)

This is predication number 1. The second one happens just a few verses later. The disciples are fighting again. They are fighting about whose fault it is because they were not able to exercise a demon. Again, Jesus says, “You’ve missed the point. The Son of Man will be given over, crucified and buried and then on the third day will be resurrected to new life.”

The disciples stop arguing for a moment, listen to Jesus give the predication and then go back to fighting. This time fighting over who is the greatest disciple among them. So Jesus then brings in a little child and says if you want to be first, you must be like this child.” Again the disciples listen for a bit, and then start arguing again because some guy is exercising in Jesus’ name and he should be made to stop. Now it is safe to say, the disciples were acting like children but not in a good way and not in the way Jesus just told them.

Which brings us to our third and final passion prediction. Two of Jesus' most inner circle disciples respond to this prediction by asking for places of honor when he comes into his Kingdom. These two, who should have known better, who have been with Jesus in the beginning, who have stood on the mountaintop, experiencing the Transfiguration, these two who have heard the voice of God saying, this is my Son, Listen to him, these two respond to the third and final passion prediction with requests for seats of honor.

To say that they missed the point is the understatement of all time. The disciples don't understand who Jesus is. The disciples don't understand what Jesus' mission was all about. The disciples don't understand the character of Jesus.

How could they be so blind? How could they not get it? How could they not know?

I say all this but then I read the headlines. I hear stories about what is happening in communities of faith around us. Parking lot meetings over what the color of the carpet should be in the sanctuary. Splits in churches over who is welcomed as members and who is not. Arguments over doctrine become the mission of the church. Even this past week, the Russian Orthodox church split from Constantinople. This break comes in response to the decision of Bartholomew 1, the leader of the global Orthodox Church, to issue a statement,

confirming plans for an independent Ukraine Orthodox Church and reforming ties with a previously split part of the church. I know this doesn't seem like a big deal to us in Midway KY, to those of us who are part of the Protestant tradition. And that the only ones who care about this split are church geeks like me.

However this split is huge and it matters. It matters because this is part of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. There could be fights over church property. It is being called an issue of national security for Ukraine and if that is not enough, tensions could spread to the Balkans, an area that is already in tension due to conflict and unrest. Church authority and politics, notice I didn't say religion, I said Church authority and power don't mix with politics because it always leads to an ugly fight. Just look at church history and all the schisms which happened when church authority and politics combined.

My heart breaks because some two thousand years later, we as the ones who should know better, as the ones who have experienced the power of the resurrection, still don't know what it means to be servants of Jesus Christ.

Time and time again, we have fallen for the false narrative of this world which tells us power and might are the only way to get ahead, yelling and screaming at each other are the only way to get what we want, belittling and devaluing others is the only way we can feel better about ourselves. And the sad

thing is I'm not talking about that these things only happen out there. They are happening in communities of faith right here, right now, in our community, in our state, and in our nation as well as happening all over this world. We are not immune from this whole conversation of thinking we know what Jesus meant when he talked about servanthood in the Bible only to ignore it when it comes practice in our real life.

This whole conversation about servanthood and serving others seems so simple and straightforward. Maybe one day we will figure it out. Amen.