

Improving Our Serve

October 17, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Mark 10:32-45

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33 “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

36 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

37 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

38 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

39 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 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.”

Every once in a while you may think you understood something when you find out later that you totally missed the point. If you think that never happens to you, ask your significant other. I recently read something about an old nursery rhyme I had learned when I was a child. Our Anglicized version of it goes something like this:

Ring around the roses/ A pocket full of posies/ Ashes, Ashes/ We all fall down.

I thought it was just a little nonsense rhyme but it turns out that it was intended as a mantra people repeated to remind themselves of health etiquette during a pandemic.

Some say it dates to the time of the bubonic plague, where the “ring around the roses” represent the red, rash-like blotches on the skin. “A pocket full of posies” would be the herbs people would carry on their person to “help protect them and others from the plague, as well as ward off the pungent smell of the disease.” “Ashes, Ashes” was originally “A-tishoo! A-tishoo!” as a reference to the fits of sneezing one experienced as a symptom of the plague. “We all fall down” was a reference to the mass deaths caused by the plague. At a time when most people could neither read nor write, this simple rhyme served as a reminder of the need for cleanliness and hygiene to help curb the spread of a pandemic.¹ Perhaps we need to make a new nursery rhyme for our present day pandemic?

At any rate, there are times in our lives when we are told something repeatedly, and we may think we understand, only to discover later that we may be way off the mark. This same kind of thing happened with the disciples. They thought they understood what it would take to be great, but they were way off the mark.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem with the disciples. He knew what would happen to him once he got there. He would be going to the cross. He warned the disciples – and this is the third time he warned them – about what going to Jerusalem would entail. **“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”** (vv. 33-34) Short and to the point. Jesus was going to Jerusalem in order to die. Of all times to make a request of Jesus regarding who amongst them would be the greatest, they chose to ask about that right after he told them he was about to die. The disciples were totally clueless as to what Jesus was talking about.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” Now, if you had a child that came to with a similar request – “I want you to do for me whatever I ask” – what would your first response be? Probably something along the lines of: “Not until I hear what it is you are going to ask”! That request is like a blank check for who knows what it will be used for. But Jesus responds out of graciousness: **“What do you want me to do for you?”**

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” In a traditional kingdom the king would place his most valuable subjects in the seats to his left and to his right. It was there on these thrones that the leaders would rule with authority and power. The disciples did not realize that God’s kingdom was not about sitting on thrones and wielding power.

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered.

¹ John Creedon, “That Place We Call Home,” Gill Books, 2020, 2021, pp. 30-31.

Jesus, of course, knew that the cup he was on his way to Jerusalem to drink was the cup of salvation, a cup that he would share on the last night he would spend with his disciples. It would entail suffering, death, and eventually a new baptism, going from death to life at his resurrection.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” James and John would indeed suffer for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. And they would also experience a new baptism, a resurrection from the dead. But as to the ones who would be seated in positions of authority was not something it was for Jesus to grant them.

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. You would think they would have been indignant at the audacity of James and John to bring up about their jockeying for positions of power right after Jesus had told them he was going to die. I mean, if you told some of your closest friends that you were about to die and they wanted to argue about who was going to give the greatest speech at your funeral, you would likely marvel at your friends’ obtuseness and offensiveness, to say the least. Jesus’ patience with his disciples defies description.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.” And here, perhaps, is the central message of the gospel. It’s not about who is the greatest, unless you want to make it a competition is who can out-serve the other person. Who can be the greatest servant? It truly is counter-cultural to the competitiveness we see in our world today.

I like how author and theologian, N. T. Wright, puts it:

The reason James and John misunderstand Jesus is exactly the same as the reason why many subsequent thinkers, down to our own day, are desperate to find a way of having Jesus without having the cross as well: the cross calls into question all human pride and glory.²

This temptation to have Jesus without the cross hits churches and pastors as well. There are churches that want to be the greatest. I have even heard some representatives of those churches claim to be “the greatest show in town.” There are churches who do not want to display the cross of Christ, or talk about sin, commitment, or servanthood because such talk and images would, in their opinion, “be offensive” and

² Wright, T. (2004). [*Mark for Everyone*](#) (p. 141). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

might deter people from coming to a worship service where everyone can feel good about themselves.

There are pastors who want to be the greatest. There are a number of churches, including our own sister United Methodist churches in our area, who have suffered because the people of the church have followed the pastor rather than follow Christ. Any church that exalts the pastor at the expense of following Christ will eventually implode, because such a church is not really a church. They are committing idolatry of a pastor.³ I would not want to be those pastors' place when they have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ and give an explanation for what they have done in the name of Christ.

Our Lord calls us to serve others, just as he served others. He served us by going to the cross, dying for our sins, and being the ransom to rescue us from certain destruction. It is indeed counter-cultural to lift high the cross, the symbol of servanthood and shame, and say that this is the way our Lord calls us to follow Him. But this is the way of those who want to walk in the footsteps of the Lord, our teacher and our guide. The moment we consider ourselves great, we have missed the mark. Only Christ is great, and he has demonstrated his greatness by being the suffering servant of us all.

³ For an example of this, check out Christianity Today's podcast, The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>