



“We Are Able”

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Mark 10:35-45

The bumbling, blundering disciples are at it again. Didn't we deal with these followers, several weeks ago, fighting over who was the greatest while back at Capernaum? But, evidently, the closer they got to Jerusalem, and the more the disciples realized that something big was going to happen, the more they wanted to have a major role. James and John, two of the three that were part of Jesus's inner circle; the ones who were the very first called by Jesus to follow him - the ones who were at Jesus's first healings; the ones who saw him transformed and transfigured right before their very eyes; the ones who heard him say time and time again that he would suffer and die - these two rambunctious kids basically ran up to Jesus and yelled “shotgun!” They wanted to be in the front seat on Jesus's drive to glory. They wanted to have a chair at the head table and be at a place of honor when Jesus finally took control. They had to have known that trials and tribulation would come, that suffering would indeed happen. But they also thought that they could handle it as long as they were the ones who had the power in the end. They knew they could face anything. They thought that they were able.

But we've been here before with the disciples, right? We have so many lessons to learn from these fumbling followers. They seemed to get everything wrong and we, today, can learn from their mistakes. One of the main things they just couldn't understand was that Jesus' purpose was to be a different kind of a Messiah, a suffering servant who would eventually die and rise again. As we've made our way through the Gospel of Mark in worship on Sundays and in Wednesday night Bible study, we've learned that Jesus predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection three times. And the third and final time came immediately before our lectionary text for today. We skipped right over it. I suspect these verses were omitted from the lectionary because they, yet again, repeat what Jesus had already said previously in chapters 8 and 9, where Jesus predicts his fate. From a literary perspective, the threefold pronouncements were a way for Mark to assert the reliability and inevitability of Jesus' prediction. But we also need to see the important things that happened before and after these prophetic proclamations.

As you might remember, way back in chapter 8, Jesus cured a blind man at Bethsaida, but it didn't seem to work and it took a little time for the man to regain his full sight. Remember he said, “The people seemed like trees.” Then came Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Christ when Jesus first announced his impending death. But, Peter didn't quite get it and rebuked Jesus, saying that a true Messiah wouldn't die in this way. And then Jesus rebuked Peter right back by saying, “Get behind me, Satan.” Then, in chapter 9, Jesus repeated his declaration that he would die in Jerusalem, a pronouncement that terrified his disciples into silence as they were journeying on the way. That is, until they began arguing with each other about who was the greatest because, again, they just didn't get it. Jesus then tried to make it simpler for them by doing an object lesson, putting a child in the middle of the circle and telling them that greatness was about

welcoming the vulnerable and those on the margins. And now, in chapter 10, Jesus said once more in those verses just before our gospel reading for today, that he was going to Jerusalem to die. It says, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” And after that third pronouncement the disciples still didn’t get it, they still couldn’t see what was about to happen.

For, you see, they went up to Jesus like their personal genie and asked for a wish. They boldly ran to Jesus and said, “Give us whatever we ask of you!” And Jesus, who seemed to be more patient than normal, went along with it and said, “What do you want me to do for you?” And we see that James and John still didn’t understand the servant part of Jesus’ teaching. They had become hyper-focused on the glory part, that part after Jesus would rise in power. One commentator said, “Sure, there will be some hassle, some suffering, some struggle, but then the glory. Perhaps James and John were thinking about it like a high school athlete considers the daily training regimen for the team. They did not see themselves sweat-covered and exhausted; they saw themselves holding high the victory trophy. It’s the glory.”

And it was then that Jesus replied, doubtless with rising exasperation at this point, that James and John didn’t have a clue at what they were asking. Could they drink the same cup of suffering and death he must drink, a cup that in Hebrew Scriptures was the wrath of God? According to Scripture, the cup might have been a reference to the foaming cup of wine in Psalm 75:8. “In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.” Could they drink that cup, a cup that felt like anger, abandonment, and pain? A cup that Jesus himself would later ask be removed from him if possible? And could they be baptized with the same baptism Jesus was to endure? A baptism into servanthood, a deep, soul-washing dive into the very suffering, death, and resurrection that Jesus had been trying to tell them time and time again? And still clueless about what it all meant, James and John said, “We are able. We are able, Jesus, to do a little bit of sacrificing in order to be your right-hand and left-hand men when you build your earthly kingdom.”

Rev. Leonard Vander Zee, pastor and author says, “But there is a bigger issue at stake here, the nature of the church. The disciples seem to think of themselves, and by extension, the church, in the same way that they think of the structures of society and government. It is another hierarchy where some people lord it over others. Instead, Jesus insists that, ‘it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.’ Instead of a race to the top, Jesus insists on a race to the bottom, the prize of servanthood.”

So, we see that the disciples were focused on the wrong thing. James and John hustled their way to Jesus’ side to ride shotgun in the Messiah mobile and then hoped to receive special places of honor in the kingdom. This, of course, caused the rest of the ten disciples to angrily grumble about James and John’s pushiness. In reality, the rest were kicking themselves for not beating James and John to the front of the line. And as is usual for the disciples, Jesus’ words still hadn’t sunk in and taken hold yet even though he plainly and clearly said that to be great was to be last and to serve others. The disciples were blind to Jesus’ plan. Which leads us into the story of another healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus, which we will take a look at next week.

But we've heard this all before, right? The gospel reading for today sounds similar to previous weeks because Jesus seemed to say again and again that to be first required being last and servant of all. And being a servant certainly challenged normal expectations during Jesus' time because even in the ancient Near East, there was appreciation and shock when leaders and rulers provided service towards the public good. It was already out of the ordinary. But Jesus pushed it even further, however, when he went on to say that to be first is to be a slave of all. Although some texts have softened the language to say "servant of all," that is not what the Greek word, *doulos*, means. It actually means slave and slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder, just like children. There was no honor or reward in serving others as a slave.

And Jesus didn't simply mean that his followers were the only ones who would be servants of all. No, Jesus was the true example of servanthood. We see at the end of the gospel lesson today that Jesus' words were meant for him too. Like his disciples, he did not come to be served but to serve. Jesus took servanthood one step further. He also came "to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus took on the form of a slave, serving all of us, even to the point of death on the cross, to open our eyes from the blindness to how God loves us, of how much God, who walked with us in the flesh, would give up everything for us. Proclamations of his sacrifice didn't work. An object lesson with children didn't work. So now, maybe an object lesson where God's love was revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus would be just the thing that would strip the scales from the disciples' eyes. Maybe now the disciples, including James and John, would see what it meant to truly be great.

But I find it really interesting how these healings of blindness - the blind man in Bethsaida and the blind Bartimaeus text for next week - bracketed Jesus' three pronouncements of his impending death, the disciples' failure to understand, and Jesus ongoing teaching about what constitutes greatness. Mark told the story this way because he knew that Jesus' words and his example ran contrary to how we think about power, leadership, and greatness. The disciples, and we, are blind to what it means to be true servants of all. In today's reading, James and John thought greatness came from status and power and those closest to the conquering Messiah. But in response, Jesus pointed out that service was in the DNA of the Divine. We must learn how to serve others, or we will become a different kind of slave, a slave to our blindness and a servant to our delusions that status and power and wealth and fame and possessions are all we need.

Are we able? Are we able to be servants? We must be able to have a different vision, a different perception of ourselves and the world so that we can make the most impact on our community. We must be able to slowly see through our blindness and understand Jesus' mission of servanthood and sacrifice. We must not serve the polarities and the particularities and agendas of our culture that say we can only be free if we climb the ladder to the top rather than race to the bottom. We must be able to hear the voice of Jesus that calls us to find our freedom and our true selves through service to our neighbors, to our community, and to our world. That is what we must learn today. Service, not power; self-giving, not self-seeking. These are the marks of true discipleship. True disciples are busy serving others rather than vying for position. James and John have a lot to teach us. And we must be better than James and John.

Not only can we learn from James and John's mistakes, we must also learn from and embody their enthusiasm. They knew they were able to do the things Jesus needed them to do. They knew they could suffer, feel pain, feel loneliness, feel persecution, in order to live as Jesus and act as Jesus. They knew they were able. And we, too, must know we are able. We are able today. I know that we might have jobs that demand seventy hours a week and we just don't know how we can do anything else, but we are able. We might have crushing student loans or stacks of unpaid medical bills, but we are able. We might have debilitating physical pain and deep emotional sorrow, but we are able. We might have hurtful prejudice and deep-rooted anger flowing through this city, but we are able. On this Bread for the World Sunday, we might be overwhelmed that so many people, so many children, do not have a crust of bread to fill their stomachs and that we can't do anything to help, but we are able. We might have an ambitious dream for this church to be on the front lines with Jesus to serve the poor, and the displaced, and the immigrant, and the marginalized, and the hurting, and the outcast, and the unredeemable, and I want us to know that we are able. Church, we are able!

One of my favorite folktales comes from India: A water bearer had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. And while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what the cracked pot perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" The pot said, "I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half of my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value for your efforts."

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the pot apologized to the bearer for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walked back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

As we go throughout this week, I know we feel like we are stumbling through life, broken vessels with the same blindness as the disciples, tripping over the crumbling debris of doubt, fear, and loneliness. I know we are just as confused and worn out as those first followers of

Jesus. But, even if we don't fully understand where we are going or what we are called to do, we must run to Jesus, in our faults and our fears, and say, "Jesus, we are able. We're not quite sure what it means to be a servant of all and to sacrifice our lives for others, but we, indeed, are able." That's the first step to servanthood, to admit that we are able to do good in the world right now. And it might be tough and it may not feel like enough. But know that in our shortcomings and in our challenges as parents, as workers, as Christians, and as servants, that even though the cup is harsh and the baptism heavy, we mustn't lose hope. Because through the suffering servant Christ, we are able.

Amen.