

Today in Mark's Gospel we find Jesus, who has been with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem...on the way to the cross, and along the way Jesus is teaching them about what true discipleship looks like. In the midst of their journey to Jerusalem, there are three "passion predictions" in the Gospel of Mark. A "passion prediction" is where Jesus is revealing what it means to be the Messiah as he foretells his trial, suffering, death and resurrection. There are three verses of Jesus' final and most detailed passion prediction, which are left out of today's lectionary reading. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem," Jesus says, "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" (Mark 10:32-34). As we read today's Gospel reading, coming on the heels of Jesus' third time telling his disciples what was going to happen to him, may we listen with different ears to Jesus' final discipleship lesson. **PRAY. READ Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV). Listen to a word from God.**

My brother, Clay, is 13 months younger than I. Let's just say growing up was a competition for most things. Who could get to the kitchen table the fastest? Who got the last bowl of whatever sweet cereal was in the house at that time? Who finished their dinner first? Who got the best grades? Who called dibs on the last piece of my grandmother's lemon pound cake? Who was the best athlete? We constantly fought over who got to ride shotgun to school because we wanted the best seat- though that changed that one day my mom's car broke down in the middle of

downtown- we both wanted the backseat that day. My brother and I did and do love one other. I tell myself my behavior was all for self-preservation, self-protection, it was also for power and prestige. If I didn't look out for #1, who else would? We both could be a little self-absorbed. I confess that I occasionally slip back into this behavior when my brother and I are together. I know none of you have ever acted a fool before to get something you wanted?!

Speaking of foolish behavior, James and John, in today's reading in Mark, are displaying inappropriate behavior at best. Can't you just hear them? "Hey Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (v. 35b). Like a wise and attentive parent, Jesus doesn't fall for it. Really, James and John? Where have y'all been? You all have been following Jesus for almost three years now and you're still clamoring for status? Jesus has already had a lesson in chapter 9 on "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35b). Have they learned anything? "In Matthew's Gospel, Matthew was so embarrassed by James and John's lack of understanding that he lets them off the hook by having their mother make this request of Jesus" (C. Campbell, p.189). And Luke? Well, Luke just avoided the embarrassment altogether by dropping this story. In Mark's Gospel, James and John respond to Jesus' news of what is to come by requesting what they thought were privileged places of supreme honor in seats at Jesus' right and left in Jesus' glory. Talk about putting their feet in their mouths?! They really don't appear to have a clue, and Jesus even tells them this- again. "You do not know what you're asking," Jesus says to them. "Are you able to

drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” (Mark 10:38)? Their mind was on what they perceived to be Jesus’ fast track to glory, and they wanted to ride the train to victory with him. So much so that they quickly agreed to the question Jesus asks them. They may have heard the words but they had no idea that the cup is the cup of suffering that Jesus himself will later ask to be removed if possible on the eve before his crucifixion (14:36). Jesus on his knees in Gethsemane cries out in prayer, “Abba, Father, for you are things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). “Jesus’ prayer shows us what it looks like to lose one’s life and to save it; it means surrendering our wants for God’s and, in so doing, showing our trust and faith in God when it really counts” (Alicia D. Myers, *Connections*). We also can’t forget the cup of vinegary-sour wine offered to Jesus while he lay dying on the cross. In his “baptism” reference here, Jesus is reiterating what awaits him in Jerusalem: a violent death. Talk about ironic?!

It’s interesting to note that Robert Hunter, who wrote the lyrics to *Ripple* for The Grateful Dead, the song that Darby just sang, wrote two specific lines that remind me of this irony. The lines are *Reach out your hand if your cup be empty if your cup is full, may it be again. Let it be known there is a fountain that was not made by the hands of men.* The American Songwriter magazine said of Hunter’s writing of *Ripple* that *he delivers lyrics that evoke cosmic wisdom and serenity without ignoring the darkness on the fringes of even the most blessed lives* (<https://americansongwriter.com/the-grateful-dead-ripple-behind-the->

[song/](#)). It's also interesting to note that after the first two passion predictions the other disciples also put their feet in their mouths. After the first one (8:31-32), Peter rebukes Jesus and then in turn was rebuked by Jesus. After the second one (9:30-32), the disciples ask Jesus which one of them is the greatest, to which Jesus responds by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (workingpreacher.org, Rolf Jacobson). Haven't they learned anything? Obviously not because having just heard for the third time- this time in more detail- of Jesus' upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection, James and John ask if they can sit on Jesus' right and left side in his glory. They don't get **"that the ironic place of 'glory' is the cross- and that two criminals will 'sit' on his right and left there"** (*Feasting on the Word*, C. Campbell, p. 189). Talk about not getting it?! Yet, perhaps James and John aren't as power or prestige-hungry as some think but instead are acting on their fears? In the skipped verses of Jesus' final passion prediction, we're told that "those who followed (Jesus) were afraid" (10:32). Most times the disciples get a bad rap, yet maybe they understood more than we give them credit for?! There is a connection between fear and the quest for security. For example, "fear over Christianity's future- even its survival- has led to all kind of efforts to secure ourselves (not unlike James and John) rather than risking the way of the cross. Fear is a big motivator and breeds the desire for security" (C. Cambell, p. 191). Fear- some may argue- can get in the way of following Jesus. And some of us may say, "If only the disciples took seriously where their feet were taking them instead of where their egos

or fear was taking them.” Fair. However, couldn’t we sometimes make the same observation for ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ?

James and John’s request to Jesus angers the other ten disciples. I imagine that James and John aren’t the only disciples enticed by visions of a triumphant reign- of calling the best seat. Can you imagine the squabbling that was going on among them? No wonder Jesus once again gives a lesson about greatness and servanthood. **Up to this point in Mark, discipleship has been about following and now it’s also about serving.** There’s a lot more at stake now- true selflessness and relinquishing of their understanding of power. “Jesus corrects their vision by holding up the example of gentile (Roman) rulers” as being antithetical to the kingdom of God (*WP*, Matt Skinner). Whereas the Gentile rulers lord it over the people and are tyrants over them, in the kingdom of God, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (vv. 43-44). **The goal is to serve, not to be served.** The new world is not remotely like the old one. In God’s kingdom, the old world is turned upside down. Jesus rejects the relations of power in the surrounding culture and world. But human nature and the old world loudly promotes, “If you want to be great, you must strive to become great by getting ahead of others.” And yet, “being baptized involves entering into the way of the cross- taking up the cross and following Jesus (Mark 8:34). Similarly, sharing the cup at the table invites us as a community of faith into the way of the crucified Jesus. The sacraments- baptism and communion- challenge all fear-driven quests for security,

and call the church into the alternative way of Jesus- the way of servanthood” (C. Campbell, p. 191). The way of the cross- Jesus affirms- is the way of resistance to systems “that exercise power over others and try and control others, by hierarchies of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed” (C. Campbell, p. 193).

I just returned on Tuesday from Boston where my husband, Dean, ran in the marathon on Monday. I’ve cheered him on in marathons before; nevertheless, it was inspirational to be a part of the crowd there in Boston offering so much love and encouragement along the journey. The runners had worked so hard to prepare for this race and yet many of them faced tremendous adversity. One guy was running for his young 8 month old daughter who had died this year of cancer. Others were racing for people and causes near and dear to their hearts. I saw several amputees running alone or with a guide as well as some who were blind being escorted by a guide. I saw others pushing people in wheelchairs or racing in the wheelchairs themselves. Watching these runners who had worked so hard, I immediately thought of a story I read a few weeks ago in *Runners World* about Seguin High School cross-country runner Ali Gutierrez from Arlington, TX, who stopped during a race where she was hoping to get a PR (personal record) to help a fellow athlete from a rival school. Much like the story of the Good Samaritan, several others had passed this injured runner by, but Ali said she couldn’t just leave her there. So Ali gently pulled the injured girl, who had hurt her leg, up to her feet, put her arms around her and

walked with her slowly for about a half a mile until they found some help. Even though Ali didn't win, she had no regrets with her decision to stop (<https://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/a37776915/high-school-runner-helps-injured-competitor/>).

It's servanthood that turns James and John's question to Jesus upside down- "Teacher, we want to do for you whatever you ask of us" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p. 45). For God alone is God- and we are not. We're called to surrender to what God wants- no matter what. "Such surrender does not mean we will not fear or not want another fate. For even Jesus cried out, 'Take this cup from me!' Nevertheless, he followed that request with, 'Not what I want, but what you want'" (Myers). May we do the same! Amen.