

Pastor Jennifer McCurry
Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
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Mark 10:35-45

We have spent weeks and weeks journeying through the gospel of Mark. We keep seeing how confused the disciples have been about Jesus. They are following him, but they don't seem to get it. From day one, they marveled at Jesus' miracles and wondered who he can be. Just before our gospel lesson today, Jesus gives his third (and rather detailed) prediction of his passion, death and resurrection. The verse before our text begins says, "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." (*Mk 10:32*) The cycle of the disciples confusion and Jesus' correction continues.

Today we overhear a conversation between the Zebedee brothers and Jesus. Like the other disciples, they have been focusing on the good times to come. What will happen when Jesus is glorified. It must have seemed so close to them! Of course, they want to know how they will fit in. They sound like a couple of kids seeking their parent's favor. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (*Mk 10:37*)

Ultimately, James and John are asking not just for seats of honor. They are asking to control Jesus. Their request was much more general at the beginning.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” (*Mk 10:35*) They didn’t veil their intentions at all! They are essentially saying: “Give us control of whatever we want. Write us a blank check, Jesus.”

It may sound ridiculous. How could they think that they could control Jesus, of all people?

But we know that we always want to control over our lives. We have hopes and plans for us and for the people closest to us. We have dreams for the communities that we are a part of. We want to do what we can to make those wonderful happen.

Most of us want to control Jesus’ body on earth, the church, at some time or another. As a church, we are torn between two poles. We either want to hold on to the church tightly, in order to keep our traditions alive. Or we want to drag it with us, so that it moves along to where we think it should be. It is possible to do both – to honor our past while responding to the Spirit’s new invitations. The question is about the timing. We are called to pray in all things in our lives. To discern God’s will, and God’s timing.

The main problem is a Zebedee issue. We want to be in charge of what Jesus – or his Spirit – is doing. We want to determine how fast God moves.

In our text, Jesus corrects two mistakes of the Zebedees. First he makes it clear that they can not control him. He will not give them blanket permission for anything they want. (What parent would do that?) Then he helps them shift their focus away from Jesus' glorification. He tells James and John that he can not promise seats of honor to anyone. Those who would be great when the kingdom comes have already been chosen.

After Jesus hears the other ten disciples angry at the Zebedees, Jesus teaches them all about what it means to seek "greatness". In a gospel community, to be "great" does not mean to be in power on high. It is the servant who will be most honored. The slave will be the leader.

We don't hear the words servant or slave very often at this point in history. They have such bad connotations. We think of the oppression of blacks from Africa, who were sold into slavery. Children in underdeveloped countries, who are forced to work in awful conditions. The best picture of them all is one of gentle British servants of upper crust households.

Even if we're not talking about dehumanizing slavery, it still evokes an uncomfortable air. We live in a society that claims to provide opportunities for every one. Our culture tells us to dream big. That anything is possible for our lives

– the American dream can be ours. Who wants to be at someone else’s beck and call? Who would choose submission and powerlessness over an alternative?

That is precisely what Jesus teaches us to do. “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (*Mk 10:44*) Jesus invites us to seek greatness differently. The only way to be great involves a life of servanthood. St. Paul puts it another way. In his letter to the Galatians, he boils down all of scripture’s laws to one law: Love your neighbor as yourself. (*Gal 5:13*) We’re to make sure that our neighbors have food and drink, clothes and places to sleep. We’re to exorcise the demons that control their lives. Heal the sick. Forgive those who have sinned – especially those who have sinned against us. Teach the good news. Live God’s grace for others. Offer our time and ourselves in love for our neighbors.

We have all been baptized for this mission – into our Christian vocation in the world. In the waters of baptism, our captivity to sin was put to death. God began recreating us, freeing us from being enslaved to sin. Enslaved, as we often are by our longing for control and our longing for grandeur. This is why we confess our sins each Sunday morning. God forgives us of all those things that tempt us. God releases us so that we may seek another life. One that fosters relationships based on love and forgiveness. One that participates in God’s hopes, for all of creation to

experience a full life together. One that serves our sisters and brothers, instead of jockeying for control.

As a congregation, we support one another in our lives of service – within these walls, and outside of them. As a congregation, we also seek to serve the community around us. To be a sign of God's grace here in the north boroughs.

After worship, we will discuss our congregation's budget for the coming calendar year. It is a document forged in faith. We don't yet know how much our members and guests will contribute. The fact is that we never do. But our budget envisions what we will need most for our year of ministry. It hopes and plans for a foundation that will enable us to continue in our life of faith. To love and support one another. To hear the word and be fed by Christ. To reach out to our neighbors in need. To live God's grace in word and in deed.

Our ultimate goal is not like the Zebedees. We don't seek to control what Jesus is doing in our world today. Nor do we try to be the best, most glitzy church possible. But we are prayerfully planning so that we can care for our neighbors. So that we can prayerfully discern how God calls us to live. We are laying groundwork to be the Spirit's servants together. May God guide us to faithfulness and joy.

Amen.