

The familiar maxim, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” Strangely may be appropriate for our text today. It is not so much that Jesus fools the disciples, but as we have perused this section of Mark, his prediction of arrest, suffering, and death clearly confound them. It is obvious that they just don’t get it. Further, it’s not so much shame on them, but sort of. C’mon. Really? This is the third time in a brief span that Jesus has talked about his impending arrest, suffering, and ultimate death. He will be killed, and then, and only then, will there be a resurrection. After each prediction, the disciples follow with some trivial or inane action or question. According to Mark, the first time this happens, Peter has the temerity to rebuke Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord, this must *never* happen.” The second time Jesus makes such a prediction, the disciples’ tone deafness is even more stunning. Their response? They begin a discussion amongst themselves as to who is the greatest. Their friend tells them he will suffer and die, and they compare egos! Well, I guess three times is a charm. In today’s text, James and John outdo their colleagues in how audacious they can be and directly ask Jesus for seats of power when he comes into his glory. Jesus predicts his suffering, and they jockey for supremacy. Shame on me.

Such obtuseness can lead us to condescend and write off the disciples as clueless and ignorant. However, another adage may ring true in this case. It goes, “Whenever you point a finger, remember there are three pointing back at you.” The disciples’ obliviousness might just symbolize all our misconceptions and delusions regarding Jesus. They may have been the first to misunderstand Jesus. They are certainly not the last. In a phrase: we are they. Indeed, the disciples intimately express what we all engage in when it comes to Jesus. For the disciples, it was the hope for first century power and earthly control that was a part of their expectation of the promised Messiah. For us, perhaps the mistaken identity finds meaning in the phrase at the end of today’s lesson, mainly, “but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

This term “ransom” is fascinating. In 21st century Western Christianity we hear the term and think about what is known as substitutionary atonement. Basically, Jesus dies for us, and in so doing pays the price for our sins once and for all. Our salvation is mediated through this action. And, for many, the implications of such salvation only really have meaning for what comes after this life. Not, necessarily, within this life. Yet, what if the ransom Jesus gives is the model of his life and not just his death (maybe not even his death at all)? What if the ransom is not simply his death but the fact that he is giving up his entire life—his teaching, healing, ministry, feeding—for the benefit of all? We move away from the gruesome act of sacrificial scapegoating that, ultimately, leads to more violence and marginalization of people. We move away from that and move toward the grace given in life and the saving power of a life that ransoms the lives of others because of how he lives. His love of those who are marginalized. His healing of those who are sick. His challenge to the powers that consign people to live within preordained castes or classes due to the randomness of birth or race or socioeconomic strata. He embodies the heart of God that sees value, worth, and sacrality in all people, for all people possess an imprint of the divine. Salvation is not something taking place beyond this world. Rather, salvation is embedded in each moment of this world.

The implications of this interpretation of “ransom” for us are amazing. . . and transformative . . . and hard. What does it look like if our lives were to model Jesus’ living and become ransoms for the life of others? What does it look like when we lose our obsession with what happens after we die, and we become more interested in what is happening while we live? What if our lives were given not as payment for sin’s debt but for the sake of others, sacrificed in service for the good of all? With the heart of service at the center of our action and saving life here and now, we most certainly would have an entirely different conversation about mask mandates and vaccines in this pandemic. No more would there be insistence on personal liberty and private freedom. Rather, we would understand that by masking and vaccinating we are serving one another, saving one another, and, particularly, caring for the most vulnerable among us. Real world implications for reading *ransom* in a different way. What would our capitalistic society—helpful though it may be—look like if service and sacrifice were at the heart of our action? We would not simply act out of self-interest and amass as much as we could. Rather, we would realize that, as our evening prayer reminds us, each of us depend upon each other’s toil. And the focus would be less on getting what we can to seeking what is fair, equitable, just, and sustainable so that we can live, others can live, our children can live, our grandchildren can live, and the whole of creation can live. Again, real world implications for reading *ransom* in a different way.

Martin Luther expressed well the essence of our tradition when he spoke on the “Freedom of a Christian.” “The Christian,” Luther said, “is lord of all servant to none and servant of all subject to all.” This tension is a part of our life together. Each person possessing inestimable value and worth. Lord of all. Servant to none. AND, at the same time and in the same degree, we recognize the inestimable value and worth of everyone around us. Servant of all. Subject to all. Implications for how we see ourselves and the world. Implications for how we live in the world and treat the creation. Implications that move us away from pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by to real issues, real concerns, real challenges, and real actions that make salvation known and recognized in this very moment and in each moment.

James and John were clueless. Jesus says as much, “You do not know what you are asking.” They were so caught up in their expectation of the Messiah, they could not comprehend a Messiah who would serve others rather than lord it over them, who would relinquish power rather than seize it, who would give his life rather than save it. In much the same way, the church—and, perhaps, we ourselves—has been clueless. We hear the familiar story of Jesus, and assume that what we have heard about salvation is cut-and-dried. Jesus died for you is true. Yet, for many, the implications end with the individual and only at the end of life. If this is our understanding, we are as clueless as James and John. Jesus challenges us to be a ransom in much the same way as he was. Not dying for the world. Rather, living in such a way that the world and life in the world is saved, redeemed, and hallowed. Imagine what the world looks like if we did!

