

Mark 10:35-45

The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

October 17, 2021

I used to show everybody pictures of my cats. “Look! Here’s Titania locking Faust in a cupboard!” But now that I’m a father, I tend to talk about my daughter. “Zoe aced her spelling test today!” When she gets old enough I’m sure I’m going to boast about her career. I hope it’s something I can understand, like Doctor, or Lawyer. These days everybody wants to be a Social Media Influencer. Or, god forbid, a User Interface Designer.

“So Tim, what’s your daughter up to these days?”

“Oh, she’s a User Interface Designer. Very important.”

“Interesting! What do they do?”

“She, ah, she...designs interfaces. For users.”

“.....oh. Who wants more tea?”

Yikes.

I wonder what it was like when James and John went home for the holidays.

“It’s so wonderful to have you home for a visit. I hope you’re not still begging in the desert.”

“Mom....I told you. We’re not *begging*. We’re *disciples*.”

“And what does a disciple do?”

“Well, we...follow Jesus. And learn from him. And sometimes people give us...food...”

“Jesus? That scruffy man from Nazareth? Really, boys, can’t you set your sights higher than that?”

“Mom, he the *son of God*.”

“Oh yes? And I suppose his best friends will sit in the places of honour in heaven?”

“...Yes...”

In Matthew’s version, their mother marches up to Jesus and demands this for her sons. In Mark’s version, they do it themselves – maybe to get Mom off their backs?

They have, of course, misunderstood the nature of discipleship. Jesus has spent the entire chapter telling them that they must leave everything behind in order to follow him. He has just finished telling them that he will be condemned, mocked, and killed in Jerusalem, and instead of taking this to heart, or at least being concerned for their friend and teacher, they choose *this* moment to come and ask for status on the day of judgment.

As Jesus says, they do not know what they are asking. “Can you drink the cup that I drink?” he asks. It is a cup full of suffering. It is a cup of death, as he makes clear at their Passover gathering – but also the instrument of a new covenant. It is a cup he

would rather not drink, as he says in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Oh yes, we are able,” they say.

“Are you able to be baptized with my baptism?” he asks. It is a baptism of purification and new life, in the same way that the Flood purified the earth and the Red Sea drowned the Egyptians, ending the Hebrews’ slavery in Egypt and beginning a new chapter. But it was new life through and in the midst of death. It was new life through and in the deep waters which for Hebrew tradition symbolized danger and primordial chaos. “Oh yes, we are able,” they say.

They are, of course, *not* able. James and John, along with Peter, are Jesus’ inner circle in Mark. They are present for Jesus raising the synagogue leader’s daughter and for the Transfiguration. It is these three that Jesus takes further into the Garden, to stand watch while he pours his heart out to God. But they fall asleep in the Garden and they flee the Crucifixion.

“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” What is Jesus’ glory? “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Friends, I think Jesus’ glory was his crucifixion. “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” It’s not in

Jesus' hands. Whose hands is it in? *The Romans*'. They place two criminals at his side, one at his right hand, and one at his left.

The disciples don't understand their jobs.

Do we?

Do we understand our jobs as disciples?

I think we often don't. I think we misunderstand the job in many different ways.

A few seem like they've never even skimmed this chapter. They think discipleship is about sharing in the glory of Christ, casting themselves as princes of the Kingdom, preaching a version of the Gospel for their own importance. If you pointed out to them that Jesus' glory was dying alone and despised on a cross because he identified with those crucified on his left and his right, they wouldn't understand.

But many of us tend to misunderstand discipleship in a different direction. "A disciple?" you say. "Not me. I'm not leading inner-city missions. I'm not working in a plague hospital. I don't spend hours in prayer. I'm not Dietrich Bonhoeffer; I'm not Mother Theresa; I'm not Thomas Merton. I'm not much of a disciple."

"Oh no, I'm not able to drink that cup. I'm not able to accept that baptism."

Beloved, if you say this, you don't understand discipleship, either.

Nadia Bolz-Weber said, “Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to teach others about him. He always sent stumblers and sinners. I find that comforting.”

If Nadia Bolz-Weber, the kind of minister *I* want to be, the kind of *disciple* I want to be, identifies with stumblers and sinners, what the heck even is a disciple?

“You do not know what you are asking,” say Jesus. *But he goes on to say*, “The cup that I drink *you will drink*, and the baptism with which I am baptized, *you will be baptized.*” They don’t get it, right now, but later that week they will literally drink the cup – at Passover, in Jerusalem. In drinking this cup, and in the blood he sheds, they will be made one with him. In Acts 12, James will indeed drink from that same cup when he is beheaded for his discipleship – by the grandson of the murderous Herod the Great.

And in the meantime – on the long and winding path from Jesus’ glory to their own glory – he gives them one simple guidepost: serve each other. Strive not to rule, but to be in *mutual* service to each other. You have been baptized into Christ’s death; you have been baptized into a life of service. You have shared in the blood of Christ; you have shared in the life of Christ. Thereby strengthened, by serving God’s children you will share in Christ’s glory.

You say aren’t good enough to be a disciple? Your service to your spouse says otherwise. Your compassion for your coworkers says otherwise. The way you conduct

yourself every day, bringing another bit of beauty and colour into the world, says otherwise.

You say you haven't shared in the sufferings of Christ? That chronic illness, that emotional pain, that low-status job to which you nonetheless bring dignity says otherwise.

Siblings in Christ, through the work of Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, your work and your pain are made holy. You are already sit in places of honour at the table of Jesus Christ.

Amen.