



Building Bonfires

Week 3: Living Service

Kris Keller - 10/26/2025

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. ²¹ And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²² But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

²⁴ When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

- Matthew 20:20-28

Isn't it something that the Sons of Thunder were too scared to go ask Jesus all by themselves if they could sit beside him in his kingdom? While the term isn't used in Matthew's gospel, when the author of Mark introduces James and John, he not only refers to them as James and John, the sons of Zebedee, but gives them the nickname "Boanger-ez" or "sons of thunder" or even "sons of commotion," which gives me visions of a group of teen boys that don't know where their arms and legs are going or how loud their voices are.

This fits: there's a scene in Luke 9 where, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus attempts to stay at a Samaritan village on the way up to Jerusalem but the villagers will not receive him. So James and John do the logical thing and say "Lord, since they won't have us, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy and consume them?" Jesus quickly rebukes James and John and they head on to another village.

Lots of machismo, bravado, act now, think later kind of stuff. But that fits! After all, in Matthew 4 when Jesus calls James and John to follow him, Jesus finds them repairing their fishing nets with their father. And when Jesus calls, they leave dad without a second glance and go!

So why does momma have to go with them when they ask the big question? All of that energy and enthusiasm, but when it comes to asking for power and authority, they bring in mom.

Or maybe I'm totally misreading the situation and James and John don't even want this honor for themselves, but momma wants it for them, so she takes it upon herself to ask.

One of the trickiest parts of preaching is deciding where to start with scripture. But to understand why the unnamed mother of James and John would be so bold, we need to go backwards a little bit, to Matthew 19 where Jesus is speaking to a large crowd when a rich young man comes up and asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus tells him he simply has to go, sell all his possessions, and give the proceeds to the poor. The rich

young man walks away, unwilling to let go of what he has, prompting Jesus to talk in Matthew 19:23 about how hard it will be for a rich person to enter God's kingdom.

Peter asks Jesus, look, we've left everything to follow you! What about us? Jesus looks specifically at his twelve disciples and tells them when the Son of Man enters his kingdom and sits on his throne, you'll receive thrones of your own, and then, looking at the rest of the crowd gathered, says you'll receive back a hundredfold of what you've given.

So it makes a little more sense that the unnamed wife of Zebedee would approach Jesus and make such a request: hey, remember those thrones you were talking about a minute ago? I was wondering if my boys could sit close to you? She doesn't approach with brash assumption; instead, she approaches as a suppliant, kneeling before Jesus and not speaking until Jesus first acknowledges her.

The problem is she wasn't around for a crucial part of the conversation. If we flip back to chapter 20, in verse 17, Jesus pulls the twelve aside and reminds them, Hey, this road we're walking now leads to Jerusalem and here's what's going to happen when we get there: I will be handed over, condemned, mocked, flogged, and ultimately crucified, only to rise again on the third day.

Back to the unnamed mother of James and John: You don't know what you're asking, Jesus tells her; you missed an important part of the conversation. Are your boys able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? Other translations say "Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I'm about to be baptized with?" Are your sons willing to undergo the condemnation and mocking and flogging and death that comes with following me?

The first among you must become a slave.

When you join a United Methodist congregation, you're asked "As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?" As we've

talked the last several weeks about building a bonfire at the Downtown Church that isn't just for us, for our own cooking, for our own pleasure or recreation, but rather a bonfire that brings us all in and unites us as one, we've talked about joyfully giving our talents, our financial gifts, our time, and our physical presence with the same zeal and enthusiasm as if we were scouts getting to build the biggest, brightest, warmest bonfire.

As we work together to build that fire, we recognize that we've all got pieces to add. Gathering kindling may not feel as important as splitting logs or striking flint and steel, but have you ever tried to start a fire without kindling? It doesn't work! Those logs need the heat from the smaller stuff before they'll ever catch. I may not be able to give as much financially as the person next to me donating stock that they'll never need, but tell that to the kid who gets to go to Unite with our youth group this summer because I gave what I could.

That's where the conversation eventually turns between Jesus, James, John, and their unnamed mother. Can you give what I'm asking you to give? The first among you must become a slave. I came not to be served, but to serve.

There's a difference between serving someone and being a servant. Serving takes my time and energy; it might cause me some discomfort in the form of sore muscles from rebuilding a tornado-damaged house or crawling around on the floor with kindergarten kids.

But being a servant takes my identity and social status. I'm fine with serving. I'm fine with bearing witness to the power of the gospel in my life. I'm real good at being busy, busily cooking for Easter breakfast or busily running out to Aldi to buy cookies for the kids at Rare Breed or busily hammering a nail to repair someone's house, but the call of Jesus, the call of our baptism vows, isn't just to be busily doing; it's an entire identity shift. I'll serve a meal at a shelter, but I want to make dang sure you know which side of the line I'm on.

Not just to serve, but to become a servant. Not just a lot of activity and doing stuff, but a total identity shift.

Jesus doesn't just call us to this kind of life; he shows us what it's like every step of the way. As the gospel writers are trying to figure out how to talk about it, the early church writes songs and hymns about it. St. Paul quotes one in Philippians 2:6-11: let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

From the earliest days of the church, people have been trying to figure out how to talk about this. How do we talk about a God who takes on a human body, but not just any human body, a human body in Roman-occupied Judea, born to an unwed mother. How do we talk about a God who doesn't call people of high status to follow him, but instead calls a bunch of unwashed day-laborers and tax collectors to follow him as he travels from town to town as a homeless rabbi? How do we talk about a God who, on the night he is betrayed, strips down, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes all of the mud, animal feces, and stink off the feet of his friends? How do we talk about a God being betrayed by one of his closest friends, stripped down and beaten before humiliatingly hanging on a Roman cross for everyone to see as they walk into the capital city for the busy Passover season?

Well, you don't just talk about it. You join Jesus in the complete identity shift, leaving behind whatever status you've been born into or rightly deserve, and become a servant, not just doing acts of service because they feed our ego or we think we're supposed to or because it feels good to for a while, but leaving behind our own status to become a servant. That's our witness to the

work of God in our lives, to work daily to leave the ego behind and to become a servant, just like Jesus.

You don't just talk about it, you live it.

When we promise to give our service and our witness, this is what we're talking about. Not just busily doing stuff, even really good stuff, not just standing on a street corner hollering about God's love or sheepishly having a conversation with a coworker about what church you go to, but living it. Because in one of the great mysteries of our faith, instead of just doing it all without us, God has entrusted us to be Christ in the world today, and like Jesus, not just serving, but witnessing to the great love of God we know in Jesus by becoming servants.