

Mark 10:35-45

We can only guess what's going on in the minds of the disciples as they walk the dusty roads with Jesus. To set the context, this story takes place only 5 days before Jesus' crucifixion. Four days before his betrayal and trial. Here we are steps' away from Jesus' destiny in Jerusalem. Three times now Jesus has told them, directly, what's going to happen, that he is going to die, and each time they react badly. Moments before crucial events in their life they are a bickering, petty, quarrelsome lot.

It seems they haven't wanted to know why they're on this journey in the first place. James and John were among the first of the 12 to follow Jesus. And it's Peter, James and John who become the closest, most intimate, friends of Jesus. Whenever Jesus wanted to be free of the crowds, but still wanted some company, he'd take those three: they were his "inner circle." Through the gospels, there are countless stories of Jesus attempting to bring these three disciples to a higher level of spiritual consciousness.

Still, as much as Jesus apparently *liked* James and John, he must have realized they were kind of pushy, because he gave them the nickname, "*The Sons of Thunder.*" James and John aren't shrinking violets; "sons of thunder" are "in-your-face" kinds of guys. So it's not really a surprise when they cozy up to Jesus one day and ask a little favor. With their conviction firmly established that Jesus is the Messiah, James and John boldly put their request. Think about the political elections of today. "*We'll follow you anywhere, Jesus, when you establish your kingdom in Jerusalem; just make sure that at the end of the road there's a cabinet post, or an ambassadorship, or a favored seat at the heavenly banquet.*" The request actually comes out like this: "*When you're finally in your glory — when you're in charge of this kingdom you've been talking about — we want to be right there by your side.*" They believe they have paid their dues. They have given up family to follow Jesus. It seems now to have been a calculated decision. Give up a little now, but get glory when it really counts.

It's a parallel theme to the story last week, where we met a rich man who wanted to know if life lived in total obedience was enough to get him eternal life. It's like the scene near the end of the movie "*Field of Dreams.*" Kinsella has plowed his corn field to build a baseball stadium in the middle of nowhere. He watches imaginary baseball players play. He's a laughing stock in the community. His wife worries about him. His banker brother-in-law comes after the farm. But Ray persists. He has listened to a mysterious voice "*If you build it, they will come. Go the distance.*" He followed the voice. And finally he is vindicated. Everyone sees what he sees. But then, at a crucial juncture in the movie, when Ray thinks he being left out of the play-off, when he isn't invited into the corn with the disappearing ballplayers, Ray wants to know, "*What about me? What's in it for me?*"

So here we are in this story, just before Jerusalem, after a 3-year traveling seminar, James and John are feeling entitled. The request is for two good seats at the victory party. As so often happens, Jesus responds with another question. "*Sitting next to me? That's what you want? You don't know what you are asking.*" Their question reveals that they still think the path of discipleship is all about getting a reward in glory. They obviously saw the Kingdom as governed by the same rules as earthly ones - where Jesus would sit on a throne and his favorites sit on his right and left. The seats at the right and left hand of a powerful person are also positions of authority, granting power by association. They did not fully realize what such a request might entail. In fact, when Jesus came into his kingdom, it was to be a criminal on his right and another on his left. Asking for places at the right and left of Jesus was a dangerous prospect. They haven't grasped yet that discipleship is about a way of life, not about a pay off.

Jesus surely perceives their ambition and the ignorance behind their boldness. Yet there must be

something worth engaging, worth affirming, worth granting. Jesus treats their ambition as worthy of redemption. Earlier in this chapter a rich man tells Jesus that he had kept all the commandments. Then Jesus, "looking at him, loved him". It must have been that way with these two as well.

James and John are ambitious, and perhaps power hungry. Not that ambition itself is wrong: it invites an employee to work harder to get promoted, a student to study longer for better grades, an athlete go through grueling training to claim the prize. Where ambition gets to be a problem is when it makes us self-centered, less aware of others, closed to where God might want to lead us. It can blind us to what God can do in our lives and through our lives.

Jesus confronts James and John, "*You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink or be baptized with the same baptism that I am baptized with?*" And yet, when challenged, they do not turn away. They responded, "*We are able.*" We are reminded of the hymn "Are Ye Able" - "*Yes, sturdy dreamers answered, to the death we follow thee.*"

With this knowledge about what Jesus really invites of us, desires of us, it isn't immediately clear why one would want to sign on for a life of discipleship. Maybe Jesus should have hired some modern political operative to help spin his message. Maybe he should have held some focus groups and test-marketed his approach first. And yet there are times when it is refreshing to meet an honest politician. Jesus wants people to know for sure what they are signing on for.

And what is that? In the normal way of the world – to be a ruler is to have power and privilege. To be considered great. To have good seats. But instead Jesus talks about being a servant. He implies the subversive power of being a servant, of creating a community that serves one another, that doesn't seek power. Jesus is inviting the disciples to create communities like this where the kingdom of God is at work. Don't worry about power, privilege, or where you're going to sit. His point is if you build communities of leadership based on humble service, you won't care about obtaining the good seats.

Whether we can make sense of it or not, serving is how we will transform the world, not from the top down but from the bottom up." True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another. "Follow me, says Jesus, and you'll learn what *sacrifice* is all about." Frederick Buechner says this about sacrifice: "*To sacrifice is to make something holy by giving it away for love.*" Whether it be an aging parent, a spouse, a child, or any person whose situation elicits our service at personal cost. Jesus came to serve and to give his life.

Servant does not mean a slave or a subservient being. Rather, it is a caring, humble individual who seeks the good of all. *During the American Revolutionary War a company of soldiers under the command of a captain was building a fort out of a pile of heavy logs. While wrestling with a log which was to form the capstone and was really too heavy for the men to handle, the captain kept yelling at his men "heave it up", while he himself stood by with his hands on his hips. Suddenly a stranger in everyday clothing rode up on horseback, and seeing the soldiers sweating and struggling with the log, he stopped and asked the captain why he was not helping his men. "I AM AN OFFICER" was the reply. With that the stranger leapt off his horse, took off his coat, and helped the men put the heavy log in place. Then, as he was about to ride away, he said to the captain "Next time you need help, just call on me. My name is George Washington and I am Commander In Chief of The United States Army!"*

Story on the last shall be first. *There is a strange event in India, called the Slow Cycling Race. A gun sounds and every one moves as slowly as possible. In fact, some sit on their bicycles, feet suspended off the ground, not moving an inch for long periods of time. The goal of the race is to come in last.*

We will hear the challenge to seek, to serve, and not to be served, to give with no expectation of return, to be part of building the Kingdom of God. We are challenged with the question, "*Are ye able?*"