

Mark 10: 32-45

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but 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.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; 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.'

Scripture/children's time:

Call kids up front to read scripture and listen to it, coming up together to support each other - even if not reading. **We support by showing up. - doing things we don't want to do -**

Go to concert of a sibling, or even coming to church, or the CROP walk,

Or for some coming to Church around the table has felt hard, but they do it to support others.

READ SCRIPTURE

Did they hear what James and John, brothers, said to Jesus 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

Can you imagine saying that to your teacher? How do you think your teacher might respond?

Jesus listened, he didn't get mad, and he told them what they needed to do.

Did you hear what it was? Be a servant of everyone... that's not easy...

What does that mean for us?

Give kids letters to unscramble. - will need these 3 words later in the sermon.

SERMON:

Start with story of when I was a child - going to a new church = Prayerfully ask for 3 wishes.

Maggie wished BIG: Kitten, monkey, baby... what were my mother's? Definitely not Maggie's!

'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

Sounds a little like those 3 wishes, in a way.

What a curious statement for his disciples to say - and even more so when they say it!

In our scripture today we're on the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. We're told those following him are afraid. At some level, they know that what lies ahead is... well, scary.

Along the journey, Jesus pulls the 12 aside, just to talk with them, wanting them to understand what's ahead. He wants them to hear, again, that suffering is where they are headed, together.

This is the third time that Jesus has foretold of his death in Mark's gospel- the first time we have Peter rebuking Jesus as soon as he tells them, and Jesus saying 'get behind me, Satan' - reminding his disciples that they're setting their mind not on divine things, but on human things (Mark 8: 31-33).

The second time Jesus openly spoke about his death, (Mark 9:30-32) we're told the disciples didn't understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask, and instead started arguing amongst themselves over who was the greatest.

So, no wonder the third time isn't quite the charm - that once again the disciples aren't quite sure what to do when Jesus is speaking like this, about death, his death.

So, the sons of Thunder, Zebedee's sons, pluck up the nerve to ask about what's really on their minds. Never mind this talk about suffering and death - let's talk about what comes after that, glory. That's what's on their mind.

In last week's scripture, J looked with love at the man who had run and fallen at his feet, asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus loved that man, took his request seriously, and answered from a place of love....

and now, in today's reading, just after he was with that rich young man, we're on the way to Jerusalem, to a death Jesus has just outlined in gruesome detail...

And when some of his closest companions come forward with this presumptuous request -

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

He responds with patience and curiosity. Jesus loves them. He takes them seriously.

"What is it you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks.

"Grant us to sit," they respond without hesitation, "one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

What an honest request!

It's All about me... What about me, Jesus? Honestly, that's how we work most of the time.

They want to join Jesus in that place of pride, that privileged place.

‘ They don’t simply *want* these things; they’re convinced that they deserve them. That they’re *entitled* to them.

It’s easy to gasp. Or to laugh. Or to dismiss the two boys, James and John, as arrogant fools. But Jesus does none of these things. He takes their request seriously, and engages in a conversation that is compassionate rather than condemning, says Pastor and writer Debie Thomas¹, whose ideas I share freely in this sermon.

Before we dismiss those disciples as once again being clueless,

Debie asks us to consider what James and John get *right* in this passage.

First, the two brothers place their full faith in the right person. Undaunted by Jesus’s gloomy predictions of suffering and death,

James and John cling to the belief that Jesus will prevail in the end. Though they have no concrete idea what Jesus means by “resurrection,” they trust *him* — his word, his love, his power, his leadership, his mission.

Given what they’ve seen, heard, and experienced, they can’t conceive of a meaningful future apart from their Teacher. *Their personal hopes and dreams —imperfect though they might be — are rooted in Jesus. Are ours?*

So, they put their faith in the right person.

Second, James and John *ask*. They ask. They engage in real relationship with Jesus, and express an authentic desire to remain close to him. Real relationships require honest engagement.

Third, they expect and *want* Jesus to be glorified; they expect and want the world’s wrongs to be righted. They’re not complacent about injustice, oppression, and violence;

they actively long for Jesus’s kingdom to arrive in all its glory and remake the world.

James and John get the essentials right.

Jesus does not criticize James and John for their ambitions.

He doesn’t say,

“It’s wrong of you to want greatness.

It’s sinful of you to strive.” Instead, he redirects their striving. He offers them a radically different definition of greatness.

¹ Debie Thomas. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1978-what-glory-looks-like>

James and John, in their response - "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you", they're saying - "We're entitled to something here, Lord. We're willing to wait patiently, but we've sacrificed a lot to be your disciples. *What's in it for us - this journey, this suffering, what's in it for us, Jesus?*"

The disciples sound familiar - what's in it for us?

In contrast, Jesus responds with the question:

"What is it you want me to do for you?"

Not, "Here's what *I* want," or "*Excuse me* - Here's what I'm entitled to," but rather,

"I am here to serve. How can I serve you?"

Jesus redirects the intention from

'Here's what I want, what we want' to 'how can I serve?'

From entitled to one who lovingly comes with an attitude of support.

I've been wondering a lot lately about why we come to church.

We live in such a culture of, "what's in it for us?"

- in days that are so tightly planned and scheduled, and now in COVID, where coming to church looks so different, I've started to ask '***why come to church?***'

The disciples asking 'what's in it for us?' reflects our consumer culture, which is part of church culture today, and is so contrary to these texts in Mark's gospel that keep hammering home what it means to be a disciple.

I really want to know - and welcome hearing your thoughts -

Why come to church?

And, so, as I began working on this sermon, and not having anyone around to ask early on Monday morning, I googled it.

When I googled 'why come to church?' - the first hit was Billy Graham.

Then an article entitled 'the surprising benefits of going to church'...

The list went on.

And then this one caught my eye: 'why attending church no longer makes sense'². Written by a pastor, Carey Nieuwhof.

He says that it was clear, generations ago, why you went to church- church was the social, cultural and missional hub of the community, as well as the main way one connected with God.

But now, in a culture that's got 24/7 options of connections - secular and religious, he says the main reason he gathers with the church is, in his words: "I AM the church". You don't attend the church, Nieuwhof says, You ARE the church.

Bring in kids with unscrambled letters -

You are the church.

BE THE CHURCH

What does that mean?

What does it look like to 'be the church'?

Do you think it's tied to what Jesus said when he said 'be servant of all' - to take care of others?

(kids can go back to their seats)

Nieuwhof goes on:

Being the church has something to do with living your life like Jesus.

Being the church can be as simple as showing up when someone is doing something. Showing up says 'I care about you'.

When someone says, 'we're going to eat lunch in the park, will you join me?'

Showing up is a way of saying 'I love you. You matter to me.'

² <https://careynieuwhof.com/why-attending-church-no-longer-makes-sense/>

Being the church is asking - how can I support you?

Nieuwhof goes on:

Being the church has something to do with living your life for Christ, demonstrating God's love by serving others and sharing your faith with people.

He says, That's very different than consuming church in a back row, which you can just as easily do on your back deck or the cozy couch in your living room.

Be the church.

Jesus responded to his friend's request: "What is it you want me to do for you?"

"I am here to serve. How can I serve you?"

James and John got some things wrong, but they also got some important things right -

They place their full faith in Jesus - they believe in him.

They ask - they enter into relationship with him.

And

They expect the kingdom - they *want* to be a part of a new way of life in which Jesus' way of caring for the poor and oppressed is lived out.

Yes, yes, yes!

So, I welcome more conversation together-

Why come to church?

Church is changing - it's been changing for a long time, way before COVID.

What does it mean to 'be the church'?

I want to hear - ever since I came to UMC, I've wondered, why here? What makes people want to come to UMC, and not somewhere else?

What does it mean for us, for this community, to be the church, here, in this time and place?

Jesus' call is once again a radical one -

"whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all"

Hard words to live by. Hard. And yet, somehow,

I want to 'be the church'.

But to "be the church" is not a solitary journey. We do it together, we ask, struggle, stumble, even argue -

That's part of what it means to 'be the church', I think.

I hope we can continue to wonder together -

what does it mean for us to be the church,

to be University Mennonite Church here, in State College, at this time?

Let's explore, together, what it means to "Be the Church".