

Mark 10:35-45

THE ROAD TO GLORY

The great industrialist Henry Ford once asked a young engineer to share his greatest ambition. The man replied that he wanted to become very, very rich. Everything else was less important than this one goal in his life. A couple of days later Mr. Ford handed the young man a package, which contained a pair of metal-rimmed spectacles. However, in the place where lenses should have been, there were two silver dollars. Mr. Ford said, "Put these on." Then he asked, "Now, tell me, what do you see?" "Nothing," the engineer replied, "the money blocks out everything." Mr. Ford then added as he walked away, "Maybe you should re-think that ambition of yours."

That story came to mind as I reflected on James and John and their ambitious request to Jesus: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They were saying in effect, "Lord, give us what we want." I imagine Jesus probably had a pretty good idea what was coming next but he asked them what they had in mind. James and John didn't hold back one bit. They said, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

What's interesting about their request is that it immediately followed Jesus' third prediction of what awaited him in Jerusalem in terms of his betrayal, his suffering and subsequent death, followed by his resurrection three days later. While the twelve disciples heard Jesus' words, it's quite evident that they certainly did not understand what Jesus was saying to them. Sherlock Holmes repeatedly told his friend, Dr. Watson: "You see, but you do not observe!" Likewise, the disciples listened but they did not fully comprehend what Jesus was trying to convey to them.

At least John and James understood that something important was about to happen. They perceived that Jesus was on the road to glory and, to their way of thinking, when Jesus fully disclosed himself as the Messiah, he would be sitting pretty atop the pyramid of power in the world. Therefore, James and John wanted to put in an early bid for the best seats in the house – one on Jesus' right and one on his left. James and John expected a new world order to come into being with Jesus, the Messiah, in charge. These sons of Zebedee hoped for fine appointments within the inner council of the newly established government; they yearned to be privileged members of Jesus' newly established cabinet. Obviously, they felt deserving of such an honor.

Did you notice in the text that Jesus didn't chastise James and John for such an outlandish request? Instead, Jesus informed them that they didn't have a clue as to what they were asking of him. Then, Jesus asked them a pointed question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" In other words, were they able to drink from Jesus' cup of suffering; were they prepared to be baptized with the same terrible experiences he would soon endure? "Are you able to endure the suffering, humiliation, and death that I am about to undergo? Can you also pay the high price of offering up your lives for God's kingdom on earth?"

To their credit, James and John answered in unison, "We are able," but it's clear that their good intentions would soon fall flat, as they would be missing in action during Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution. And, at the very moment of Jesus' glory, the two "seated" on his right and left would not be James and John but the two thieves on each

side of Jesus' cross! Jesus agreed that, in time, they would share from his cup and enter into his baptism of sacrifice and suffering. And, indeed, they did. Herod Agrippa beheaded James, and John also suffered greatly for the Christ.

Mark notes that the other ten disciples overheard this conversation between Jesus, James and John, and they became angry with the two brothers – probably because Zebedee's boys had gotten the jump on the rest of them and asked Jesus before they did.

On the road to glory, Jesus stopped and called the disciples to huddle around him for a teachable moment. It was time to set the record straight (once more!) as to how the ways of the world differ from life within the kingdom of God; the two were not at all alike. The disciples' desire to sit in places of honor was just like the Gentiles whose rulers "lord it over them!" The Roman rulers and oriental masters count greatness in terms of power – how many people do they control, how many subjects can they order around to do their bidding? The worldly view of greatness depicts someone at the top of the pyramid of power, who calls the shots, throws their weight around, and has no equals, only subordinates to carry out his or her decrees.

Then, Jesus offered an alternative for understanding greatness. He did so by inverting the pyramid so that the peak was no longer at the top but at the bottom. Thus, the closer one gets to the upside-down peak, the lower the prestige, the heavier the burden, and the more people to care for, love, and serve. In God's kingdom, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." To drive home his point, Jesus emphasized the fact that he asked nothing of the disciples that he wasn't willing to do himself: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The kingdoms of the world vie for power and prestige. But, in the kingdom of God the standard for greatness, the road to glory, is found in service to others. The followers of Jesus are not to seek after "What's in it for me? What can I get?" but to serve by asking, "What can I give? And, to whom can I be of help?" Then and now, Jesus is calling the church to service and sacrifice and to back away from the worldly pattern of callous control and domination.

As we have seen time and again, Jesus upends worldly values. The paradoxes of the Christian life are these: we gain by losing; we get through giving; we find freedom by being slaves to Christ; we derive strength through weakness; we find rest in our labors; we come alive by dying to ourselves; we find ourselves by losing ourselves for the sake of others; and we are exalted whenever we humble ourselves. And now we can add that we become great whenever we serve others, and we come in first by being last.

Jesus' brand of discipleship is hard to swallow and even harder to follow. If we seek to follow him on the road to glory, there are high costs to pay if our destination is to live, now and forever, within the kingdom of God. It's not intended to be easy!

I'm reminded of an event that took place in my second pastorate, thirty miles north of Dallas. In the chancel of the sanctuary there was a big, beautiful banner that hung down. It had the word "PENTECOST" coming down the left-hand side and there were multi-color flames around the cross along with a descending dove. I had just finished a wedding and the photographer was taking pictures of the wedding party. He asked the bride to pose holding her bouquet. He took her picture and, while he changed cameras, one of her relatives snapped a picture of the bride with his Polaroid camera. I stood next to the relative as we watched the film develop; then, we both began to laugh as

the letters “C-O-S-T” appeared over the bride’s right shoulder in the picture. He had wanted a close-up of the bride but, in doing so, he had gotten only the last four letters of the word, “Pentecost.” It was humorous to see the “cost” as a reminder of the extravagant expense of her dress, flowers, lavish reception, and so on; and, perhaps it was a bit prophetic in terms of reinforcing for the bride and groom that marriage is indeed costly because it demands so much sacrificial living, continued forgiving, and Christ-like loving and serving one another.

Likewise, if we are “wed” to Christ, there is a high cost expected of and exacted from our lives. Our Lord demands from us what he himself gave – our very all. Even though we, like James and John, don’t always understand what Jesus is asking of us (although, in truth, I suspect that we understand only too well!) or that we often fail at following through on Jesus’ call to serve others, the good news is that Jesus doesn’t give up on James and John or on you and me. Jesus did, in fact, give his life on the cross as a ransom for many so that we might have forgiveness, new life, and new resolve to follow him. If “we are able” to follow Jesus on the road to glory (and we are!), it is only because we are enabled by God’s power to forgive us and then equip us further to serve. We don’t just receive God’s grace and mercy, God’s love and compassion; we pass them on. Christ calls us to live life in grateful response, and we do that best by serving and caring for others.

It has been said, “The highest achievement in life is to get out of the passive voice (‘to be served’) and into the active voice (‘to serve’). It is the great divide, which some people never cross. The aim of the great ones which Jesus repudiated was to keep themselves in the passive voice, to be waited upon, ministered to, forever on the receiving end, never on the giving end. Christian experience begins in the passive voice. We are called, saved, and loved. But it must go on to the active voice of those great verbs love, serve, forgive.” (I believe this is John Claypool’s quote, source unknown).

The road to glory is no easy cakewalk. It may well include suffering and sacrifice and, to be sure, service. But that’s to be expected since we call ourselves “Christians,” those who are following Jesus the Messiah, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for many. We should expect and do no less!

Let me close with the story about the little girl, who was offering up her prayers to God at bedtime. Her father was standing just outside her bedroom door and listened to her pray. He was surprised to hear her reciting the alphabet to God. After she finished with an “Amen,” the father went into her room and asked her, “Why were you saying your ABC’s to God?” “I really didn’t know what to pray for tonight,” she answered him. “So, I said, ‘God, I’m going to give you all the letters of the alphabet and you put them together the way you want to.’”

If I’m not mistaken, isn’t that what the Christian journey is all about? In faithful trust, we open up every letter of the alphabet of our lives, and we say, “God, you take me and put me together, and use me the way you want to.” The road to glory involves service to others, and, along the way, we give glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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