

March 8, 2020

HELPING OTHERS FOLLOW JESUS Series

SERVANT (Not So With You)

Mark 10:35-45

We're continuing this morning our series on Helping Others Follow Jesus – which is our mission here at Asbury United Methodist Church. This is a time of refocusing on who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. Last week Pastor Tom shared with us a list of things that made Jesus angry. First on that list was, at times, his own Disciples. This week we are going to look at a moment in Jesus ministry when his disciples got angry at some of their own. We'll look at a moment when Jesus defined for us what it means to be His follower.

Before we read our text together today let's first take a look at what comes right before it. In Mark chapter 12 verse 32 Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem ahead of his disciples. Jesus had been speaking very plainly about what he would suffer when he revealed Himself there. His disciples knew this was not a good thing, but they were too afraid to ask him for an explanation. They followed him silently and fearfully. And as they neared the city he told them clearly that in Jerusalem He would be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, that is, to the Jewish religious authorities, and that THEY would in turn hand him over to the Gentiles, to be mocked and spit upon and flogged and **killed**. But... in three days he would rise. He would be killed and in three days he would **rise**. So Jesus foretells his death, and his resurrection. He was speaking clearly, not in symbols – other than his usual name for himself, the Son of Man. So keep in mind that backdrop of death and resurrection as we read together this remarkable story of Jesus' very human followers...

[Please stand as we read the Gospel, and follow along with me in your pew Bibles or on the screens. Let's read together Mark 10:35-45]

ESV: And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up 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 do 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." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And 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." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[I ask the Lord's blessing on the reading of His word. Amen.]

So my reaction after reading this text is: were you guys listening? Did you hear anything Jesus just said? Your Master and Friend just told you he is going to be captured, beaten, mocked, and killed, and will then defy death. And **this** is what you want to ask Him about? Really? [Just makes you want to do the Jesus facepalm. You know what I mean? <show image here>]

But seriously! There are so many better questions they could be asking Him, like: “Master, what do you mean you will be killed? We won’t let that happen!” Granted, Peter sort of asked that question a while back and he was soundly rebuked. But still it’s a better question than what James and John were coming with. They could have asked, “Lord, how will this “rising in three days” thing work exactly? I mean, will your dead body really get up and walk? Or will you not really die in the first place, but just sort of faint or swoon? Or will we just sort of have dreams and visions of you, or will we be so inspired by your heavenly message that you, you know, “live forever in our hearts,” or what? And are we talking 3 full days, or three partial days?”

I mean, really, James and John could have saved Jesus’ future church from a lot of confusion and some really bad heresies if they had just asked some better questions! But no. James and John come to Jesus asking to be his Number One and Number Two, his Vice President and Secretary of State. Real helpful, guys. [<show Jesus Facepalm again>]

And I’ve always sort of gotten a kick out of the WAY they ask it. They say, in a phrase that just doesn’t seem to translate well to English, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Sounds kind of demanding to be asking your Lord and Savior that question. But it’s really not that strange. We have a very familiar phrase in English that goes like this: “Friend, could you do me a favor?” Could you do me a favor? Have you ever thought about that phrase and how you answer it? Have you ever had that awkward moment when someone asks you for a favor, and you don’t know quite how to answer, because you don’t want to commit yourself until you know what they are going to ask? I think we’ve all had that moment. Social custom says, of course, that when we ask someone for a favor, it is usually not something that would put them out too much or be too demanding. Usually, but not always.

So James and John come to Jesus to ask him for a favor. And my favorite thing about this passage is the way Jesus responds. He is a master Teacher. And he teaches them a good lesson. After getting them to specify their actual request, He responds with a question. He asks them to agree to something unspecified, kind of like they had asked Him to agree to something unspecified. And really, Jesus was being a little tricky. You could say He was being a little unfair. However, these guys totally deserved it.

So Jesus asked them: “**Are you able** to drink the cup that I drink? Or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Now, of course, he was speaking in symbols.)

And what did James and John reply? Why, they replied, “We are able.” We are able. Of course, right? They saw where this was going. He’s about to give us what we asked, all we have to do is agree to be like Him and do what He does. How exciting! [They didn’t realize, of course, that he was telling them they would have to suffer for their faith, especially James who would be killed by King Herod. They thought Jesus was offering them something glorious here.]

But then comes the let down. The punch line. Jesus has them right where he wants them. He asked a trick question. He got their agreement. And now He gives it to 'em straight. "Oh, you will drink my cup. And you will be baptized with my baptism. But what you're asking, I can't give you." Ouch.

So, now Jesus had their attention. And he had the attention of the other Ten as well. How did those ten respond? Did they start asking good questions, and unpacking the deep truths Jesus was beginning to share with them? Of course not. They got mad at James and John. They got jealous. Even though Jesus had shut those two down, the other disciples were still mad at them, like just maybe James and John had put an idea in His head, and maybe they would still be the lucky ones eventually. I can just imagine being one of those Disciples and thinking, "Why didn't I think of that? Dangit."

Oh, but it's so easy to make fun of the Disciples, isn't it? I love the Disciples. Without them, how would we know Jesus? Without the Disciples, Jesus would be sort of a disembodied guru telling us how to live the good life, or how to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus by Himself is too perfect. He wouldn't be very believable if he wasn't surrounded by these 12 bumbling idiots who remind us so much of ourselves.

Don't get me wrong: **Jesus was and is indeed perfect, and we need His perfection to give us access to God, and to give us hope for what we can be.** We need the perfect Jesus to ransom us, to redeem us from sin and death. But we need the Disciples because they make us feel better about ourselves. They give us hope that we don't have to be perfect just **yet**. They show us just **how patient God is with us**. And that gives us comfort. I know it gives me a lot of comfort. Jesus got angry with them sometimes. But oh, how He loved them. How He loved them! You know it's the ones you love that do make you angry sometimes, right? We have this story because those men remembered Jesus' rebuke, and they remembered Jesus deep love for them.

[Tell story of Brad's "rebuke" about DEO growing and multiplying.]

So now that Jesus has their attention, he can deliver the goods. He can tell them what they need to know. So He calls them together and says:

"You know that among the Gentiles, among the nations, those who would be rulers Lord it over them" – they act like they are better than those they are trying to rule. "And their 'great ones' exercise authority over them" – that is, they order the people around.

Pause for a moment. If you are James or John – or Peter or Andrew or any of the others – what are you thinking right now? Yeah, Jesus, we know that. We know what it means to be in charge. You're in charge of us and we're happy to follow You. So, could you please get on with it and tell us who else is going to be in charge when You're King? You know, who is going to make the calls when you're too busy to attend to everything? Who is the chancellor, the seneschal, the steward, the secretary? That's what I'd be wondering if I were them; if not James and John then who? But then Jesus makes his one point:

It shall not be so among you. It shall not be so among you. In other words, forget everything you know about leadership, everything you've assumed.

Rather, **whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all.**

Whoa. Mind, blown. What did Jesus just say? He said **if we want to be great, we must be a servant**. And the greater we want to be, the more of a servant we must be. **The higher we want to rise, the lower we must go**. If we want to be greatest of all, we have to be least of all. **We have to be a slave to all**.

Now if we want to we could distill all that into a nice soundbite and make it more palatable. You know what I mean? It's a very popular pastime to take Jesus' words and soften them, take the edge off. So I could massage this a little like this: Jesus is saying the key to greatness is service. "The key to greatness is service." So go and do acts of service. Sounds good, right? Kind of like, go and do great public works. Go do your acts of righteousness in front of men and women and they will praise you and call you great. But wait a minute... that's not sounding like Jesus now. That's a little off. Jesus also famously preached in Matthew 6 that we should not do our works of righteousness in front of people to get praise by them, just as we should not pray out loud to be seen as righteous. Rather we should pour out our hearts to the Father in secret. So in the same way, in our passage this morning, Jesus is telling us something deeper than just do good things for people. He doesn't want us to just add a little service to our diet. He is getting at our very identity. We are not to be great and proud and important people who sometimes deign to offer our assistance to those in need, and expect lots of thanks. We are to be servants as **our identity**. **The way to be great in the Kingdom of God, the way to make an impact on Jesus' team, is to BE a servant**. And the way to make the greatest impact of all is to lower ourselves so far that we become a **slave**. So the we actually **live to serve** others. That is radical. It doesn't come naturally to us.

[Tell Naomi stories here.]

So Jesus is calling us to go beyond what is natural and beyond what is expected. And let me tell you, as soon as you decide to answer this call of Jesus to **be a servant of all people**, your own heart and flesh will probably start to oppose you. Because our flesh is weak and our heart is deceitful. And most of us have little interest in actually being servants. But God, in His mercy, gives us grace sufficient to overcome even our stubborn selfishness.

When it comes to learning to be a servant and what that looks like, the stories I know best are from my own life – and I am also aware of how far I fall short of Jesus' standard. One thing that occurs to me sometime is that as a pastor, I'm sort of a "professional servant." So, you know, if someone comes by the church looking for some kind of help, and I help that person, well then, I get to feel good about being a servant – but I also get to do it on "company time," so to speak. Things like praying for a stranger, or helping people find financial or food assistance, or sometimes even intervening in crisis situations, are part of my job description as a pastor. I'm aware that's a privilege most of you don't have. But on the other hand they are not my whole job, and I am as busy with meetings and deadlines and projects as many of you are, so we can all probably ask ourselves similar questions. We can ask ourselves:

~ How do I react when somebody needs help? Like what is my gut reaction? Am I annoyed? Put out? Why is that? Am I too busy to see the people Jesus loves all around me?

I definitely struggle with that one. I'm usually behind on something, and sometimes that prevents me from seeing people. I definitely need to do better about being present in the moment when God sends people my way. Perhaps you do too.

~ What are my boundaries for what I will do for someone and what I will not do for someone? Are those boundaries good and healthy? Or could those boundaries be stretched in service to Jesus?

Of course I can't tell you exactly what your boundaries should be. You've got to protect your time with your family, and your health. But I can tell you that sometimes when you answer Jesus's call, people are going to think you are strange.

[Tell story about letting a couple live with us for a few months as a young couple.]

What it comes down to is if your identity is that of a servant, you will see the needs of others as just as important, or more important, than whatever plans you yourself have made.

So do you want to be great? Then be a servant.

This is sort of a side note, but a thought occurred to me here. The Bible often talks about pride and self-will as typical sins, as things which define the root of sin. Selfishness is sinful. But that doesn't mean that ambition is sinful. The desire for greatness is not in itself sinful. God placed in humanity the desire to create and to achieve. It's part of our being made in the image of God. Wanting to make something of yourself is a good and true instinct placed in us by God. He made us to create and to work and to achieve. It's only when we twist that desire to be purely for our own benefit, when we seek greatness at the expense of others, that we get into sin. When like James and John we focus on being first and having pride of place, that's when our ambition goes wrong.

The reason I mention that is that when Jesus says "whoever would be great among you," there are some who might try to get out of that by replying that *don't* want to be great! OK, so do you want to be **significant**? Then be a servant. Do you want to make an **impact**? Then be a servant. But then some might even reply that you don't much care to be significant or make an impact. (I'm not just being silly. Do you know anybody like that? Such apathy is actually fairly widespread.) So we can ask... Do you want to **matter**? Do you want your life to **mean something**? And still, some would shrug their shoulders. I think that sometimes when people appear to not care, it's because they've been hurt, or they're afraid, and other times it's because they haven't been shown a compelling vision of what could be possible.

If one of those things describes you: if you've been hurt, or if you're afraid, or if you just haven't seen a compelling vision of what your life could mean... then **today is the day to look to Jesus**. Today is the day to ask Him to show Himself to you. He is speaking to you in this Scripture if you will listen. He is telling us what it means to have a life of meaning, a life of purpose, a life that follows in the steps of Jesus. Even if you're not feeling it much right now, I know that God made you with that desire for purpose inside you. Sometimes it just gets small and needs to be awakened. Jesus tells us that **finding purpose means becoming a servant of those around you**. And being willing to lower ourselves and give ourselves for

others actually takes a lot of **faith**. Faith that God will protect and provide for you even when you put others first.

This is the backwards gospel. This is the Good News that doesn't **sound** like Good News, but it's the truth. **The way up is down.**

[Draw picture on board of down / up (simplest picture ever)]

- Augustine quote: "Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility."

This is the truth that goes against all that is ingrained in us as humans. We are selfish from the day we are born. We give love to get love; that comes naturally, usually. But Jesus is telling us to give love just to give love, to make an impact for others. Just give, give, give. Because the Son of Man came not to get but to give. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. And when we trust Him enough to follow Him in that, only then we can say that we really **know** Jesus.

So would you like to be great in the Kingdom of God? Or at least be significant? Then become a servant of all. Sacrifice part of yourself for those who can't pay you back. And give glory to the Risen Christ for it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.