

Baptism Weekend: Are You Able to Be Baptized?

Mark 10:32-45

It is great to be back with you. Cyndi and I had a wonderful vacation...and we even took up biking. May I just say... Gig Harbor is a horrible, hilly town in which to take up cycling! But it's a great work out. In fact, when I strip down to my shorts for baptisms later, you might want to avert your gaze from my finely sculpted quads. They could be very distracting!

I want you to imagine something with me. Imagine a wealthy man in the final days of his life. One of the sons slips into hospice with a document in hand. He leans over the bed and says, "Dad...I know you're failing, but before you go...would you mind signing this revision to your will? It grants me authority over your estate. Here's the pen. Let me help you." What would you think of a son like that?

This evening/morning we turn to one of the most embarrassing stories in Mark's gospel. It portrays two of Jesus' key disciples in the worst possible light...and the other ten don't come out smelling like a rose, either! Here's the context. Jesus and the disciples are on the road when he tells them what is about to happen: "...we are going up to Jerusalem, and I will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn me to death and deliver me over to the Gentiles. They will mock me and spit on me, and flog me and kill me..."

Can you imagine hearing such things from a beloved mentor? Remember, these are his closest friends. You'd THINK such news would shock them. You'd THINK they'd respond with something like, "Oh, Lord. That's awful. What can we do? How can we support you?" Instead, you are about to hear two of Jesus' closest friends at their sleaziest.

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 [Jesus] 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 [other ten disciples] heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.

Have you ever had your kids say something like this: "Daddy, I want you to promise to do something for me." "What is it?" you say. "No, I want you to promise first!" That's exactly what happens here.

James and John, along with Peter, were Jesus' inner circle. They were often invited into the most intimate moments: the healing of Jairus' daughter, the transfiguration....Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. Perhaps that made them feel special; like they were a cut above the rest. So now, they pull Jesus aside and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

It's so audacious! Remember, Jesus has just told them he is about to die. To be clear, he also predicted his resurrection. And James and John obviously believe the resurrection part. They believe Jesus is the Messiah...that God will raise him to glory. What they skip over, is that horrifying part about his betrayal, arrest, torture and murder. They just jump right over that little detail.

They seem to realize that every step closer to Jerusalem brings them that much closer to Jesus' death. They need to act now to get what they want. And what they want is power! After Jesus gets past that crucifixion...once God has enthroned him as king ...they want dibs on the VIP spots! They're calling "shotgun!" on Jesus' front seat.

Unfortunately, since there are only two seats of honor, that cuts out the rest of the apostles. But word gets out and the rest are ticked off. You'd hope they'd be ticked because James and John were so insensitive. But no...it seems that the rest of the disciples are ticked because the Zebedees beat them to the punch! Intrigue, secrecy, manipulation, power. This is a first-century version of the literal "Game of Thrones."

Jesus answers them: "So...you want to share my glory, huh? Well then, will you drink the cup I drink? Will you share in my baptism...the baptism of suffering...and indignity...and death?"

You can almost hear Jesus take a deep sigh. He is so close to turning over his work to these apostles...and they STILL don't get it! They STILL think his kingdom will be about power and authority and political brinksmanship. So he calls all twelve of them together...and delivers the most important speech in Mark's gospel.

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so with 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."

This is one of the most counter-cultural things Jesus ever taught...literally counter-cultural! Their culture was Rome. A culture of power and domination. The higher on the food chain, the more power you had. And if you couldn't hold all the power, the next best thing was to be close to the person who DID. That's the way it was in the realm of Emperor Tiberias. And James and John assumed, that's the way it would be in the Kingdom of Jesus. Different king, different thrones. Same game.

But Jesus sets them straight. And he does it with four words: "Not so with you!" "All you have ever known is power politics," Jesus says. "Survival of the fittest. Dog eat dog. Well...not in my house. Not in my kingdom. No so with you!"

“If you want to be great in MY kingdom,” Jesus goes on, “you must be a servant. If you want to be first, you must be last.” And then comes the centerpiece of Mark’s gospel: “For even the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” It is hard to understand how radical this was. In a time and culture where some human beings were treated as possessions...as the lesser...of other human beings, Jesus was saying, “We are all radically equal in my realm.” Remember, this is the rabbi who will soon wash his disciples’ feet---the job ordinarily reserved for the lowest slave on the totem pole. Apparently, in Jesus’ realm, this IS no totem pole!

I am a pretty big Cyndi Toone fan. Shocker, right? In addition to being an incredible wife and mom and friend, I think she brings honor to her role as the wife of the Senior Pastor of Chapel Hill. And I want to brag on her. When Cyndi was volunteering in our youth ministry, they had an event that left the diner in absolute shambles. It was just trashed. (I know...what a surprise! Youth ministry is messy!) So, Cyndi found a custodial closet, took out a mop and started mopping the floors. One of our great custodians came in and caught her in the act! He said, “You can’t do that! You are the First Lady of the Church!” In other words, he was saying, “Mopping floors is beneath your station.” But Cyndi was saying, “There are no stations in Christ’s kingdom! The person who mops our floors is just as valuable, as essential...as the one who happens to be married to the preacher.”

I’ve shared this story before but it bears repeating. Torrey Wickman was an accomplished, well-educated member of this congregation. He was also retired. So when I was told that he had applied for our part-time receptionist job, I was shocked. In fact, I took him out to lunch and said, “Torrey... you are over-qualified for this position.” I’ll never forget his response: “No job is beneath a servant of the Lord.” I remember feeling ashamed of myself because in my very question, I had bought into the world’s view that some roles...some people...are more important than others. That was a Zebedee moment for me. And Jesus was just shaking his head. So...I repented...and hired him on the spot.

I’ve been reflecting a lot on this in regard to my own ministry as your Senior Pastor. We have a large budget; I have a large staff. It is easy...and frankly, common in larger churches...for the Senior Pastor to be pretty removed from face-to-face ministry with hurting people. (Ironically, those very interactions drew me into ministry in the first place!) But I forget sometimes how much a phone call from your pastor can encourage sick or disheartened people. And because we have an amazing team of deacons who do such a wonderful job calling on and caring for and serving our people—oh, how I love our deacons!—it is easy for me to become disconnected.

But I’ve become troubled by this. I don’t want to be an Ivory Tower pastor. I don’t want to distance myself from the pain of my people. So, I am doing more to connect with and pray with the hurting members of my flock. This can never replace the ministry of our deacons or of so many others of you who do such a good job caring for this church family. And it shouldn’t! We all ARE called to care for one another. But when I hear the Spirit say, “Not so with you....Mark....” this is how I am convicted.

I wonder if every person in this room needs to do a personal inventory in this area. There is a little bit of James and John in all of us! A little bit of classist...a little bit of elitist. Most of us would prefer to be served...to be cared for...to be catered to....than to do the serving.....but then we hear the Holy Spirit calling out to us: NOT...SO...WITH... YOU, Chapel Hill! You, my people, ARE different than the world!”

Honestly...ask yourself this question: "Do I prefer to be served...or to serve." One of the most challenging obstacles we face as a church is the preference... to be served. To attend...and consume... but not serve; not be involved; not volunteer. This week I sat with the leaders of one of our groups who expressed frustration because no one will sign up to help. It always falls to the same people. And they are burned out.

Serve rather than be served. It may be the most counter-cultural message we can declare. We live in a culture that exalts celebrity and enthrones its leaders. And we are easily seduced by it. We may shake our heads at James and John's bald-faced power grab...but most of us would choose prestige and position and power given the choice. We may not want to be lorded over...but we wouldn't mind doing a little lording ourselves. And then we hear the clarion call of Jesus: NOT...SO...WITH...YOU!

One of the most astounding things about Jesus' ministry was his humility. He who had every right to be served...came to serve. He who had every right to be exalted...lowered himself. We see it as he approaches the cross. And we see it at his baptism. John the Baptist said to Jesus, "You come to ME to be baptized? I need to be baptized by you!" But Jesus insisted. He presented himself...he lowered himself...he was taken beneath the waters of baptism to identify fully with his broken world. A world that didn't need another dictator; it needed a savior.

When we baptize, it is obviously a time of joy and celebration. It represents a washing away of sins; the rising from death to life; the flooding of the Holy Spirit; identifying with the Body of Christ. But it is also an act of cultural resistance. When you are baptized into Jesus, you're identifying with one who had every right to exercise authority...but chose instead to lay down his life in service and sacrifice. This world needs more servants like Jesus. If this sounds refreshing to you...if this speaks to your heart...if Jesus is the kind of Servant-Leader you want to follow...the kind of Savior you want to serve...I invite you to these waters.

Baptism is a humbling of yourself before the Lord and before God's people. It is your chance to declare that Jesus is your Lord, your savior.