

Life Beyond the Statusphere

Mark 10:35-45

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James and John, the sons of Zebedee approach Jesus to say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” “And what would that be?” Jesus asks. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in glory.”

It’s easy to dismiss these Zebedee brothers, seeing them in this conversation, at least, as nothing more than pushy seekers of a place at the top of the pedestal, but I think there is a lot of good going on here with these two disciples that we shouldn’t overlook.

They obviously were loaded with faith in Jesus. They believed, like many of his followers in those early days of his ministry, that he was full of the power of God and that he would pull off the greatest and most surprising victory in human history. Jesus Christ would defeat their hated Roman occupiers. Righteousness and justice would cover the earth, and every underdog who had ever lived would finally be vindicated. They believed in him. They believed that he could do it. Their personal hopes were completely woven into his destiny.

But there was a serious problem with their perspective. “You don’t know what you are asking me,” Jesus says to James and John.

Three times already he had explained to all of the disciples that while he would indeed “come into his own,” it would be necessary for him to be condemned to death and to be handed over and to be mocked, and flogged, and finally crucified (Mark 10:33–34). Clearly, all of that had gone in one ear and out the other. As far as his followers were concerned, he was on the fast track to glory, and they wanted to ride the train to victory with him.

Jesus tried again to help them understand afresh the kingdom in which he reigns: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,” he asks, “or to be baptized with the baptism that I would be baptized with?” He is speaking here not of baptism by water, but of the death he is inevitably going to face. And the cup—the cup is full of selfless love. Can you drink it? Can you do it? Are you able to give yourselves away?

“Of course, we are able,” they say, once again hearing the words but missing the meaning.

The Zebedee brothers in this text seem to believe that the new world that Jesus describes will be set up like the old world, only with new leadership in place. The bad guys at the head table will be removed, their chairs will be fumigated, and God’s new crew will be seated, with Jesus in the number one position and the most loyal members of his leadership team on either side of him.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Jesus tells them one more time. My new world is not remotely like the old one. It turns the old one upside down. The number ones are not the powerful ones having their pictures taken at the end of the table with Jesus; they are the quiet ones slipping in and out among the guests, refilling wine glasses and laying down clean silverware for the next course.

The great ones are not the dignitaries to the left and right of the ruler; they are the hired help stirring pots in the kitchen, testing the temperature of the soup so that it is neither too hot nor too cold for the honored guests. James and John want Jesus to hurry up and become king of the world, but he has other things on his mind. Has everyone been served? Is all the food on the table? Does anyone need anything? “For the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to

give his life as a ransom for many.”

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it so beautifully, “Jesus simply is not in it for the reward. He is in it for the love of God who had promised his own Son nothing, except the opportunity to give himself away. If you and I do not understand it, we shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves. No one ever has, not really—not Peter, not James, not John, nor any of others who were nearest and dearest to him. But you know you have caught at least the corner of this mystery if you find yourselves living in a world that is turned upside down, if you find yourselves not asking God, “God, let me tell you what I want you to do for me,” but “Lord, tell me what I can do for you.”¹ What can I do to serve my neighbor with kindness, openness, empathy, and compassion?

Christopher Finch, Walt Disney’s biographer, tells what happened when a reporter asked Disney how it felt to be famous. “It feels fine,” he replied, “when it helps you get choice seats at a football game. But it never helped me make a good picture, or a good shot in a polo game, or commanded the respect of my daughter. It doesn’t even keep the fleas off our dogs—and if being a celebrity won’t give you an advantage over a couple of fleas, then I guess there can’t be much in being famous after all.”

One of my most memorable experiences here as your pastor was serving as Principal for a Day at Cherokee Middle School, a few short blocks from our church. It was both a humble and hopeful experience, and one I will never forget. Humbling because our public schools look nothing like the neighborhoods in which they reside. It’s no secret that Madison’s neighborhoods have been segregated by race and class for decades.

But because school boundaries deliberately do not coincide with neighborhood boundaries, each of our public schools is a rich tapestry of diversity. At least 25 native languages are spoken at Cherokee, with kids of every imaginable skin color and from some of the poorest *and* richest neighborhoods in our city all learning together under one roof. Dozens of Cherokee students have no permanent address. They are homeless.

Because of the corrosive effects of poverty that our society continues to ignore, my day at Cherokee was humbling because we have given our public schools the seemingly impossible task of being social worker, neighborhood center for after school programs, emergency food provider, behavior manager, diversity trainer, builder of student self-esteem and empowerment, in addition to teaching academic excellence, and to do all of this with meager resources, low pay, and little recognition.

And yet I left Cherokee feeling pretty hopeful because of the teachers I saw who were giving themselves to their students, arriving at 6:30 in the morning, working all day, dealing with the challenges of managing behavior and a wide range of academic ability, and then running after school programs when the school day was over. I saw teachers who cared and were deeply engaged, almost none near my age because the burn out rate is so high. Teachers whose greatest satisfaction is watching their students grow to be better people, teaching not only traditional academic subjects but also how to get along in an incredibly diverse community that is indeed our city.

Greatness turned upside down. Those who try to save their lives and be on top and win all the time, they’re the ones who are likely to lose it, Jesus is saying, and those who would give themselves away are the ones who will find their lives (Mark 8:35).

There are some of us in the Christian family who got the twisted idea somewhere along the way that if you aren’t suffering you must not really be serving God. But that’s not what Jesus taught. We may suffer as disciples of Christ because his path goes against the grain. But

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Crowley Press, 1997, p. 43

suffering per se is neither the goal nor the measure of our faithfulness. Following the way of the cross doesn't call us simply to bear the burdens of life or to practice ascetic self-denial or passively accept violence or abuse. Serving others is not the same as being a doormat, disavowing one's own authority, or allowing oneself to be manipulated.

Serving means following Jesus towards that elusive kingdom of God, of making yourself available to be an instrument of love, in whatever circumstances life throws your way. As Mother Teresa famously said, "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world."

There is a lot of pressure on our kids today to be "the greatest" by the standards of the sons of Zebedee. One of the hobby horses I've been riding this fall is the demise of collegiate athletics, especially football. Gone are the days when school pride and team loyalty and character development were hallmarks of a college football program in the Big 10. Instead, what we now have is greed and relentless self-promotion, never mind the team or school you are playing for, or the kind person you are becoming. That's not what Jesus had in mind for greatness.

And there is a lot of pressure on the church these days to be "the greatest." It is all too easy to fall into the worldly trap of comparing ourselves to the bigger kids on the block, those churches in town who have a bigger membership, a larger budget, more programs. Jesus is inviting us to embrace a different measure of success: to be an instrument of love, a blessing in this neighborhood and in this city. Not to be a big, powerful church, but to be a blessing in this place, for these, our neighbors. That is why we exist, I believe, whatever our size, with whatever resources God has entrusted to our care.

I remember when I was in college, a new, young minister at the church I attended stood in the center of the chancel at the end of the service and said, "I have news for you. If you want to find Jesus Christ in the next six days, don't look for him here, because he won't be here. Before I have finished these words of blessing, he will have left already.

"Where will you find him? You will find him wherever people work together for good, wherever voices of people long silenced are listened to with respect, wherever the lonely are welcomed, and the hungry are fed."

I wonder where else you and I would hear those words today. I'm not sure we'd hear them anywhere except in church, among the community of people who do their best to follow the One who came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Amen.