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Lesson: Mark 10:35-45 | Job 38:1-7, 34-41

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<sup>35</sup>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.” <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup>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?” <sup>39</sup>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; <sup>40</sup>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.”

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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One of my favorite things about Mark’s gospel is how the disciples are consistently portrayed as foolish. The portrayal is comedic, to be honest. In Mark’s gospel, they rarely are able to comprehend the events happening around them, they are frequently caught not listening, and they have a tendency to get into petty little fights with each other. Is it just me, or is that the premise for most 3 Stooges films? So if you are in the mood for that, today’s lesson should not disappoint.

The brothers James and John have not been paying attention to Jesus. A theme that has run through recent chapters of Mark’s gospel is that in God’s kingdom – or God’s reign – greatness is measured differently from how the world measures it. The world measures it by how many people are below you on social ladders. In God’s reign, greatness is measured by one’s humility and willingness to welcome all other people into this community of God. When that lens is placed on

Jesus, the gospel tells us that his glory is seen not in how many people he rules over, but in the number of people he can serve; the number of people he can save.

The brothers James and John were present when Jesus was explaining all of this, yet it is as though they hadn't taken in a word of his. Immediately after Jesus offers a third detailed prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection, James and John make a request to sit on Jesus' right and left in his glory. James and John definitely did not grasp what Jesus meant when he was talking about participating in his glory. For the brothers, it appears they still understood the role of Messiah through the lens of earthly glory: a throne, might, and subjects bowing down. The image of Messiah they had in mind is what Jesus describes at the end of the lesson: "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."

James and John want in on that. Jesus can have the top seat, but seats 2 and 3 can't be that bad. When they make their request, Jesus begins by saying, "You do not know what you are asking," and he finishes the thought by saying, "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." There are two prevailing theories about who Jesus is referring to when he says the seats are already prepared for them. Frankly, both are acceptable answers. First, Christians have said that those seats are for the Father and the Holy Spirit: the Triune God in its glory. That works, but the sticking point is that the Father is usually depicted at the center and Son is to one side. The second theory is one that – I believe – requires us to ruminate on. This theory says that when James and John ask to be placed on Jesus' right and left "in [his] glory," Jesus understands that event as his crucifixion. The positions to his right and left are reserved for the two bandits.

When the ten other disciples caught wind of the brothers' request, they grew angry, likely thinking James and John would lord those positions over them. All twelve of them seem to be looking out for themselves, and seemingly they all want the best seats. Which is a good point to remind us that earlier in the gospel, in Mark chapter 7, Jesus says, "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come." In other words, if someone were to say "The devil

made me do it” as a defense for what they’ve done, Mark presents Jesus as one who would respond, “Actually, that was you who did it.” Now, in today’s lesson, when the disciples are once again displaying their selfish ambition, Jesus sees that as evil rising within their hearts. So all twelve disciples have misunderstood or have not listened to his teachings about servanthood. None of them grasp that the glory of Jesus could mean anything other than a throne, might, and subjects bowing down.

And I get it. Our scriptures frequently employ monarchical language to describe God. And if it isn’t monarchy, it is power in other forms. Just look at our first lesson from Job: Job did what was right in God’s eyes, yet he still lost everything. Dozens of chapters are spent trying to find an answer. When Job finally gets a response from God – who appears in a raging whirlwind – God gives Job a tour of the wonders of nature, both real and fantastic, that spans over four chapters. That response can be summarized as, “I am God. Where were you when I created the Earth and all there is, with all its magnificent grandeur? I am God, and you are not. Deal with it.” That sums up the response pretty well, and there is a lot of truth and wisdom in it for our contemplation: there are aspects of this universe that are beyond our comprehension and control, we aren’t always going to find answers, even when we desperately want them, and God is powerful. We aren’t. We need to deal with it. It seems the disciples had a difficult time holding up that image of a powerful and mighty God in scripture with the teachings of Jesus, which say that God seeks to serve. I get it. There is a paradoxical tension between the idea of a kingly and powerful God, and this statement by Jesus that ends our gospel reading; “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.”

We can hold onto that seeming paradox of a powerful God seeking to serve. But what do we do with that paradox? Do we just say that Jesus wants us to do some acts of service here and there in life, and everyone should be satisfied with that? Or is that just the beginning? I believe that Jesus has more in mind for us than just periodic acts of service. The reason for that conclusion is that if

evil intentions come from the heart, then our hearts need transforming. Periodic acts of service can be the start of that transformation of our hearts, yet Jesus has more in mind for us. The ultimate goal is to open us to having a servant-heart, like Jesus has. This is when our care for the other person may even come at the expense of ourselves or our interests. “Impossible” is a justifiable response. “No one is that selfless,” we might say. Yet, we see examples of servant-hearts after disasters, like Hurricane Helene. We see servant-hearts in common, everyday interactions. We see servant-hearts in coordinated events that provide care or support for those who might not be able to receive it otherwise. Servant-hearts when friends help friends. Servant-hearts when strangers help strangers, expecting nothing in return. When God nurtures within us servant-hearts, it is a reversal of the expected order: that rather than kissing up to those who have more power than ourselves, it is seeking to care for those who have lost out, who are vulnerable, who have been cast aside, or who have been forgotten.

The Reverend Dr. Letty Russell had this to say about the servant-heart; “The seemingly impossible role of service is possible for us all because it is not just a command. It is a gift of God. Service is God’s gift because it is God who serves us. Other gods have been revealed so that women and men could serve them. This God, the God of the Suffering Servant, the God of Jesus Christ, begins from the other end. God is, first of all, not a king sitting on a pyramid of the world creating pyramids of domination and subjugation in the hierarchies of church and society. Rather, the humanity of God is seen in that God chooses to be related to human beings through service. Jesus helps us to see the humanity of God so that we too can become representatives of new humanity. This is the image of God: freedom to serve others.”

We are about to sing a favorite hymn of mine, “Will You Let Me Be Your Servant.” The hymn speaks in the first-person and the second-person: me and you. It seeks not to describe who that second-person is. So as we sing it, I ask that you consider who that person might be. It might be several people: a friend, a family member, a stranger you encounter crying, a man seeking a meal, a mother who needs to start over after her home was destroyed. Whoever may come to mind as you sing, allow the hymn to be a prayer for those people as well.

How is your heart moved? / How might you serve them? / How might your heart be transformed?

## Will You Let Me Be Your Servant

- 1 Will you let me be your servant,  
let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant, too.
- 2 We are pilgrims on a journey,  
we are trav'lers on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.
- 3 I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the nighttime of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.
- 4 I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
till we've seen this journey through.
- 5 Will you let me be your servant,  
let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant, too.

Text: Richard Gillard, b. 1953

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