

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

John: Son of Thunder, Apostle of Love

Mark 9:33-41

John Breon

We’re meeting another “son of thunder” today—John, the brother of James. John was probably a follower of John the Baptist and became one of the first to follow Jesus. Along with James, Andrew and Peter, he heard the call to follow Jesus in his mission. He left his father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and went with Jesus to become a fisher of people.

When we talked about his brother James, we saw some examples of John’s being a son of thunder. The brothers showed anger at some Samaritan villagers who refused to receive Jesus, wanting to call down fire to destroy them. They showed ambition in asking Jesus for the places of honor in his kingdom. But there’s another scene where John alone speaks and shows his bigotry and his desire to protect his own turf.

Jesus has predicted, for the second time, his coming rejection and suffering, death and resurrection. And, for the second time, the disciples immediately demonstrate their misunderstanding. Mark highlights how each time Jesus warned about his suffering and death, the disciples show their dullness as they miss the point. The first time, Peter starts rebuking Jesus and saying these things will never happen to him. Jesus then rebukes Peter and teaches them all about denying themselves and taking up the cross to follow him (Mark 8:31-38). In the scene we’re considering today, right after Jesus tells them that he will be betrayed, killed and raised, the disciples start arguing about which of them is the greatest. John expresses that outlook in his attitude toward an outsider (Mk 9:33-41). Later, after Jesus warns them for the third time, James and John come asking for seats of honor in his kingdom (Mk 10:32-45).

The context for our reading today shows Jesus taking the disciples aside to teach them privately. He tells them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” But they didn’t understand what he meant and they were afraid to ask him about it (30-32). When they get to the house, he asks them what

they were arguing about on the road. Now, I'm sure he already knew, but he wants them to admit it. But they didn't say anything, because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. So Jesus sits down and gathers the Twelve around and talks about taking the last place and being a servant in order to be first. He holds a child as an example for them. He talks about welcoming children. We can take that literally—that's why we have children's moments and children's church and Sunday school classes and VBS for children. But Jesus is also talking about new believers who could be humble and helpless.

And John pipes up: "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us" or, "he wasn't following us." It's like John has been bursting to tell Jesus about this. His news was all he could think about and he wasn't really paying attention to Jesus.

Do you ever catch yourself doing that? Thinking about what you're going to say next and not really listening to the person talking to you? Do you ever find that being done to you? What if we really paid attention and really heard what someone else is saying before we react and start telling our opinion? Or, what if we valued what someone else says more than what we have to say? John seems to think that his report is more important than what Jesus is saying.

Jesus assumes that, in some way, everyone in Israel is taking sides about him and his mission. Is he from God or not? John wants to restrict working in Jesus' name to the official group of disciples. He doesn't want someone using Jesus' name who is not part of his approved circle of disciples. Never mind that the person is actually driving out demons and helping people. Good is being done, but don't think about the person being healed, just ask to see the healer's credentials. Does he belong to the right group? Does she have her religious union card? It's almost like John is saying, "Let the world go to hell unless the work is done by *our* people, according to *our* methods, with *our* group receiving a good share of the credit" (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 129).

But Jesus isn't worried about this other person doing good in his name. If someone is casting out demons in the name of Jesus, that person

is honoring Jesus and is not likely to start speaking evil of Jesus and his mission. "The difference in attitude isn't just about being exclusive (John) or inclusive (Jesus); it's about the difference between seeing Jesus' work as a private and privileged operation and seeing it as an event that is moving swiftly towards a showdown" (N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*).

John's attitude—and, to be fair, probably the rest of the apostles had a similar attitude—is a symptom of a disease the church still suffers from. It's so easy to think that the church is ours, that it belongs to us. We tend to think our way is the best, if not the only, way to pray or worship or be a disciple or serve people's needs. Then somebody else comes along whose theology seems off or whose personality rubs us wrong and they're successful. People listen to them. Their churches grow. Or their ministries thrive.

When I was in seminary, a group of us met on Tuesday nights for worship and Bible study and prayer. One of our professors, Billy Abraham, led the study. This was also the time when a certain preacher in Dallas was popular. He had a big church and a television ministry. He was famous for speaking "words of knowledge" about how God was healing or touching people, even people watching on TV. But his theology was shallow and heretical. And yet, people were being healed. Dr. Abraham had visited that church and saw what was happening. Someone asked, "How can that be? Why do miracles happen in the ministry of someone who teaches what he does?" Dr. Abraham replied, "God honors the name of Jesus."

Some years later, I was in another setting, on a retreat. There was a service of prayer and healing. And it was moving and powerful. But the pastor who led it held different views theologically and socially than I did. I remember commenting, "I'm surprised an old Liberal like that could lead such a powerful healing service."

God seems to delight in surprising us. God does honor the name of Jesus. God does work in ways that we might not expect. And we need to be open to what God is saying and doing.

Now, that doesn't mean there's no such thing as false teaching. We need sound, healthy teaching and practice to sustain the work that God

wants done. Fraud was later exposed in that Dallas TV preacher's ministry and the church shut down.

Here's a helpful summary of what we can learn from Jesus here:

There is breadth in Jesus' words that seeks to let people in rather than shut them out. It recognizes that not everyone is on our side, and that there are indeed standards to be fulfilled; that some are for Christ and some are against him. And that's surely a factor to be dealt with in our particular culture, which finds it hard to make definitions. But we should not be too quick to shut others out because they don't dot their *i's* or cross their *t's* to our satisfaction. (Kalas 130)

Kenneth Wyatt says that he found his model for John walking down the street in Red River, NM. David Valles was a sheet metal worker from El Paso who was on vacation with his family. He was a Roman Catholic. Wyatt reflects on the variety of people who sat for these portraits of the disciples. There were United Methodists, Church of Christ members, Baptists, Catholics, Independents. There were truck drivers, mechanics, carpenters, and a motorcycle racer. "It's no wonder Jesus has called so many different personalities to be His Apostles! No one seems to be like anyone else; yet all would be like Christ!" (*The Apostles* 18).

Let's follow John's story some more. John is with the other disciples through the rest of Jesus' ministry. He is at the Last Supper. His feet are washed by Jesus. In the Gospel that bears his name, we find references to the "beloved disciple." It's most likely that this refers to John himself. At the Last Supper, he is next to Jesus and asks who the betrayer is (13:21-27).

At the cross, he is there, along with some of the women who followed Jesus. When Jesus sees his mother there, and John standing nearby, he says to his mother, "Woman, here is your son," and to John, "Here is your mother." From then on, John took care of Mary (19:25-27). Even as Jesus gives himself for us, he gives us to each other. Entrusting Mary to John not only shows Jesus' concern for her, but also demonstrates the community Jesus wants for his people.

The beloved disciple, John, ran with Peter to the empty tomb where he “saw and believed” (20:1-10). He’s there at the resurrection appearance on the shore of Galilee. After Jesus restores and recommissions Simon Peter, Peter turns and sees John. He asks Jesus, “What about him?” Jesus replies, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” This led to a rumor that John wouldn’t die, but that’s not what Jesus said. This scene is included in the Gospel to dispel that rumor (21:22-23).

In Acts, we see John with Peter healing a lame man by the Temple gate (3:1-11). John and Peter are arrested and brought before the Council (4:1-22). After Philip the deacon went to Samaria and preached, seeing many people come to the Lord, Peter and John also went to Samaria. They prayed for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit and, when they laid hands on people, they did receive the Holy Spirit (8:14-17). So John who had wanted to call down fire to destroy Samaritans now is instrumental in Samaritans’ receiving the cleansing and empowering fire of the Holy Spirit.

Christian tradition sees John as the beloved disciple, the source of information for the Gospel of John. He is also associated with the three letters of John and the Revelation. Modern scholars debate all of that. John’s connection with the Gospel and the First Letter of John seems most likely.

There are several stories and legends about John. One of the best tells about him as an old man. He was in Ephesus and had been the leader of the church there for years. Now very old and hardly able to walk, he would be carried into the church’s gathering. He would say simply, “Little children, love one another, love one another.” Some of the people got tired of this and asked, “Master, why do you always say this?” John answered, “It is the Lord’s command, and, if this alone be done, it is enough” (Kalas 133).

How did John go from being a “son of thunder” to being known as the apostle of love? He’s another witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. He knew Jesus loved him, he knew the love of God in Jesus Christ, he lived in that love for years. And it changed him. The same can happen for us. Can you really believe God loves you? Are you willing to love

God in return? Can you see that we so often love God through loving one another?

Bob Tuttle tells about finally coming to believe that God actually loved him. This was fifteen years after his conversion. He was out jogging and feeling especially low. He asked God if God still loved him, thinking God probably shouldn't. Then God gave him an insight, saying, "Tuttle, don't you know why I love you? I don't love you because I'm a God of love, though I am. I don't love you because it's what I do best, though it is. And, I don't love you because I'm supposed to, though I am. The reason I love you is—there's just something about you that turns me on!" Bob says that in a moment his life was changed. He was delivered and he finished running with a new song in his heart (*Help Is on the Way!* 21).

In the painting, John holds his hand out. Toward the end of the Gospel of John, it says, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). John the Evangelist holds out the message of the Word of Life and asks us to receive. He holds out the invitation to come and see, to trust in Jesus and enter a new life in him. Will we respond? Will we join John and the others in following Jesus and being transformed by his amazing love?