

## Sunday, October 17, 2021 “Ambition” – Bible Study & Reflection on Mark 10:35-45

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Mark 10:35-45 (*Common English Bible*).

<sup>35</sup> James and John, Zebedee’s sons, came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

<sup>36</sup> “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

<sup>37</sup> They said, “Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory.”

<sup>38</sup> Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you’re asking! Can you drink the cup I drink or receive the baptism I receive?”

<sup>39</sup> “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said, “You will drink the cup I drink and receive the baptism I receive, <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right or left hand isn’t mine to give. It belongs to those for whom it has been prepared.”

<sup>41</sup> Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. <sup>43</sup> But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. <sup>44</sup> Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, <sup>45</sup> for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”

We live in a culture that encourages and rewards ambition. We raise our children to be competitive high-achievers. Jesus recommends another way: a way that may lead to downward mobility, a way of suffering service, the way of the cross. Is ambition always a good thing, a noble quality, in relation to a life of faith or spiritual development?

By the time we get to this Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus has predicted his suffering and death three times, in Mark chapters 8, 9, and 10. Even though Jesus keeps hammering home that he will be betrayed, suffer, and die, it’s Mark’s Gospel where the disciples never seem to get the point. They find it utterly incomprehensible that the way of the Messiah should also be the way of the cross, of sacrifice and service. Perhaps Jesus must repeat himself so many times on the point of his suffering and death, not only because that’s not what we expect of our messiahs, but also that’s not what most of us think that religion is all about.

Shouldn’t we walk away from a Sunday Service with a positive frame of mind so that we can face another week? Shouldn’t religion make us feel good? Shouldn’t religion give us a “fix” so that we can make it through another week until next Sunday? Does being ambitious always square with following the Way of Jesus?

And so, in our Gospel text, James and John have a very specific request of Jesus: "Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory." In other words, James and John want to be the main VIPs when Jesus is finally in control of eternity. But Jesus speaks to them of a "baptism" and a "cup" that he must endure.

In the other Gospels, Matthew has the mother of James and John make this request rather than her sons (Matthew 20:20-28). Luke's tender sensibilities (Luke seems to have a more positive view of the disciples than does Mark) lead Luke's Gospel writer to omit this particular episode altogether. Luke places this dispute over greatness at the end, at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-27). This squeamishness over this particular episode about ambition suggests to me that we are hearing the report of an episode that must have caused the Gospel writers to squirm with embarrassment. How could the disciples, the ones who followed Jesus every step of the way, have so badly misinterpreted his teaching and example?

Jesus speaks of his "cup" and his "baptism," picking up on Old Testament metaphors for the tribulations that would accompany the inauguration of the messianic age. Again, how could they misunderstand a condition that ought to be clear from the scriptures?

The misunderstanding of the disciples at this point in the text, deep into Mark's Gospel, only a short time away from the cross, suggests that the disciples are much like us. Ambition, the desire to look out for number one, seems to come with the territory. It seems to be built into human nature itself.

Humans have a propensity toward ambition. Jockeying for power and position has characterized the behavior of the disciples of Jesus then as now. The final verse in this Sunday's pericope, verse 45, is a fitting conclusion, not only to this section of Mark's Gospel, but also for our thoughts on the messianic identity of Jesus. Jesus is here not to receive, but to give, to give even his very life.

It is a lesson that the disciples of Jesus must ever learn and relearn because such downward mobility, such self-giving service seems so much against our natural inclinations. Jesus teaches his disciples, then and now, a truth that continues to cause us to misunderstand and to often resist the call and message of the cross. A crucified messiah seems to us, and to them, an oxymoron. Disciples of a crucified messiah who must serve one another and those in need in the world seems to us a violation of the whole purpose of having faith in Jesus. We come to be served by Jesus; he calls us to humble service. We take up the identity of Jesus' disciples in order to live up to our best human potential; Jesus urges us to take up our cross and follow. Here is the gospel of Christ at its most countercultural and challenging.

I close with the opening verse and refrain of the old gospel hymn, "'Are Ye Able,' Said the Master":

"Are ye able," said the Master, "to be crucified with me?"

"Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered, "to the death we follow thee."

"Lord, we are able." Our spirits are thine.

Remold them, make us, like thee, divine.

Thy guiding radiance above us shall be a beacon to God,  
to love and loyalty.

Yours in Service to Christ,

Pastor Greg Rupright