

Lord, We Are Able!

Mark 10:35-45 *They replied, “We are able.”*

Jesus is walking toward Jerusalem. Mark tells us that his disciples and others who are following him are afraid and amazed. They sense the confrontation that will take place in the great city, the seat of religious and political power. Jesus stops on the road, takes the twelve disciples aside, and tells them once again what is going to happen to “the Son of Man.” Handed over, condemned, mocked, flogged, and killed. Then he will rise again.

Right after this, the brothers James and John approach Jesus privately. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” That’s one way of approaching Jesus, to get what we want. Popular religion is built on that approach. Come to Jesus and get what you want—health, wealth, power, success, assurance of the afterlife, assurance that you are right and everyone else is wrong! This is consumer Christianity. Jesus is made into whoever we want him to be—endorsing our hate, our prejudice, our selfishness, our violence, our nationalism, our greed. We want you to give us whatever we ask, Jesus!

Jesus doesn’t reject James and John. He doesn’t berate them for their lack of understanding. Jesus gets frustrated by his disciples’ failure to grasp what he is about and what the life of faith is really about, but he never belittles them. He takes them where they are and tries to deepen their understanding. What is it you want me to do for you? Well, when you come into your glory, can we sit at your side? Can we have important positions? Ministers of something-or-other? They assume that Jesus is going to overthrow the existing religious and political regimes and establish God’s kingdom once and for all. And when that happens, Jesus will be top banana and there will be positions for his closest campaign workers—I mean, his followers!

The scene is embarrassing because it reveals that James and John haven’t heard a word Jesus said. Or it certainly hasn’t sunk in. They represent the disciples who, in Mark’s gospel, never quite get it even though Jesus tells them again and again about the way of the cross, the way of true life leading through self-giving, not getting something for ourselves.

Do you know what you are asking? Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink, the cup mixed with blessing and suffering? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, the immersion of yourselves completely in God and the dying of the old self? This is Jesus’ way of saying to the disciples, You really don’t know what I’m doing, do you? But if you really want to share in this new kingdom that God is

bringing about and you want to be with me in it, then you have to drink the same cup and go through the same baptism. You have to give yourselves completely to God's love and will, and that will mean dying to the old way of life that gives rise to the very kind of request you just made. It means a whole change in consciousness.

The disciples quickly respond: We are able! Their response is bold and eager, even if they still don't really know what they are in for. Jesus knows that they don't understand what it's about but he accepts their willingness. Here again Jesus shows respect for his disciples even when he knows their understanding is incomplete. He accepts them where they are, with whatever measure of willingness they offer. Over-zealous or in fear and trembling, we find that Jesus accepts our willingness to follow him, our desire to live the life he calls us to. Jesus says to these disciples simply that if they think they are willing and able to go through with this kind of life, with its blessings and its struggles, they WILL drink the cup he drinks and they WILL be baptized with the baptism he is baptized with. They, and we, must experience it for ourselves, in our own lives, this challenge of faithfulness, of living out of God's love instead of all the other stuff the world offers.

Then Jesus tells James and John that to have positions of rank or status is not something they can choose or seek. Jesus doesn't have the power to grant such a thing. It is for those for whom it is already decided. That's code for: These things are in God's hands and for God to decide. So, forget about it!

The other disciples have become aware of what's happening. James and John are trying to elbow their way to the front of the line, and the others don't like it one bit. Jealousy and anger flare up. When we think someone is getting ahead of us or getting more attention, we really get hooked. We think we are all humble and don't care about recognition for what we do or how hard we work or the seriousness with which we take the life of faith. But let someone try and get some attention or recognition and the jealousy flames up out of nowhere.

So Jesus huddles up the disciples yet again. He keeps on teaching every chance he gets. He is willing to turn a situation of misunderstanding and conflict into an opportunity to teach and for his disciples to learn and grow. I like this. It reminds us that as a community or in the smaller communities of our mission groups, we will have conflicts, misunderstandings, and tensions. Our egos will get in the way. Let's not fall into the illusion that we are somehow above that sort of thing. It's what happens to us as human beings when we get together to work on something. But whenever a conflict arises, we can see it as an opportunity to reconnect with what is important, to learn more deeply what Jesus is teaching us about being his community governed by a spirit of forgiveness, charity, and empowering love. These are opportunities to grow more into selflessness.

Look, says Jesus, the Gentiles, those non-Jews we say we don't like, view their rulers as those who lord it over them. And that's how it is. They buy into the power and prestige game. They lord it over each other. But that is not who you are. Boy, if we could only remember that! If only all who say they "believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior" could remember that! Those who are in politics or business or the church itself—all who say they follow Jesus. If all could just remember that "it is not so among you." That is not to be the way you live, says Jesus, the way you look at things. It is not about gaining power and influence. It is not about getting our way. It is not even about defending ourselves against our enemies. And it is not about elbowing our way to the top. All of that is emptiness, vanity, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says. It is the way of the world that has forgotten who it is and whose it is. It is the way of disaster after disaster.

Among you, this is the way it is to be, says Jesus. If you want to be the greatest, then work at being the servant. If you want to be first in line, then you have to live the life of the servant, the last in line. The way into this kingdom I'm talking about is by serving others, by living your life so that life is increased for others and the world. That is why the Son of Man has come, not to be served, not to get attention or be worshiped, but to serve and to give his life in a way that liberates others, shows them the way, and gives them the vision and power to live in the same way. Jesus doesn't want to be worshiped! And he doesn't want to be made into a religious weapon we wield over the heads of others. That is contrary to the nature of who he is and what he taught. The point for us is to be sure we are following Jesus in our own attitudes and the ways we live. Are we being those who try to gain power and influence, try to elbow our way to the top? Or are we on the downward path of servanthood, living our lives in such a way that others are liberated?

The life of following Jesus as the living Christ is the most challenging thing we will ever undertake. It runs counter to just about everything in our culture and to much that is in our own habits of thinking and living. Yet, it is not counter to our true nature. Jesus knows who we really and truly are as God's beloved children, created in the divine image, to reflect the divine nature, which is self-giving love. The truly satisfying and fulfilling life is found as we live for others, letting go of the insecurities that cause us to seek something special for ourselves. Like most of what Jesus teaches, it is a paradox. We find our lives by losing them. We gain life by loosening our grip on it. We find our own salvation, our own healing, by making room for others, not by crowding them out.

In a few minutes we will sing an old hymn that some of us grew up with--"Are Ye Able," Said the Master." I remember singing it at many a Wednesday night service led by my father. The hymn always touched that desire to recommit oneself to the life Jesus calls us to. I know now, in light

of Mark's story from which the words of that hymn come, that our "yes, we are able" is always mixture of eagerness to commit to the journey of discipleship and the reality that we never truly understand what we're getting ourselves into. Fuller understanding can only come as we make the commitment and the journey.

Kaye and I have often said, half-jokingly, that if we knew what we were getting into, we probably would not have done it. Getting married. My saying no to war and our moving to Boston for my two years of work as a conscientious objector. Adopting our son Kent and having our daughter Shelley. Coming back to Lynchburg to be part of this strange little community called the Church of the Covenant! Embarking on the renovation of an old building in the central city for a community center and not knowing a thing about how to do that. Committing to the development of a retreat center that is welcoming to people of all religious traditions in a city not known for religious tolerance. The most significant events and experiences of our lives have happened because we made commitments that went ahead of our understanding. And they all have taught us the most important things about life, particularly what love really is. But that's what this church has always been about. We know we would probably never respond to Jesus' call in our lives if we knew exactly how challenging it would be, how much we would need to learn and grow. But we keep saying, "Yes, we are able." And Jesus accepts our "yes, we are able," gives us his help and presence through the challenges we encounter, and leads us more fully into the truly life giving way of servanthood.