

## Lord, We Are Able!

Mark 10:35-45

*They replied, "We are able."*

Just prior to our reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus is walking toward Jerusalem. His disciples and others who are following him are afraid and amazed. Maybe they sense the danger ahead. Maybe Jesus' talk about the way of his suffering and death is finally sinking in. Jesus stops on the road, huddles up the twelve disciples, 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.

It is ironic that right after this, James and John approach Jesus privately to ask for a personal favor. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." That's one way of coming to Jesus. 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! It is consumer Christianity. Jesus is made into whoever we want him to be—endorsing our hate, our prejudice, our violence, our nationalism, our greed. We want you to give us whatever we ask!

Jesus doesn't reject James and John. He 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 rather embarrassing. It reveals that James and John haven't really heard a word Jesus has said. They represent the disciples as a whole, who in Mark's gospel never really 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, servanthood and not lording it over others.

Do you know what you are asking? Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink, the life of intentional love, 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's purposes and the dying of the old self? If you really want to be part of this new life that God is bringing about, 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. It means awakening to an entirely different view of life, of reality. We may approach Jesus first of all to get something for ourselves. Jesus has a way of taking that and then deepening us so that we see it is not about getting what we want, but giving all we have.

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 understands that, but he accepts their willingness. 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 desire to follow him, to live the life to which he calls us. Jesus says to the disciples that if they are willing to be on that journey, 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 will experience it in their own lives as they live out of God's love instead of all the other stuff the world offers.

Finally, Jesus tells James and John that he doesn't have the power to grant what they ask for. It is for those for whom it is already decided. That's Jesus' way of saying that these things are in God's

hands and for God to decide. So, forget about it! I think Jesus is saying here, Don't live this life of faith for the sake of some reward, expecting some payoff down the road. Live it because it is right, because it is true, because it is its own reward.

By now the other disciples are 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 again. He keeps on teaching every chance he gets. He turns misunderstanding and conflict into an opportunity for us 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 or narrowness of vision will get in the way. Yet whenever a conflict arises, we can meet it as an opportunity to reconnect with what is most 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 at the Gentiles, says Jesus, those we consider non-believers. They regard their rulers as those who lord it over them. And that's how it is. They buy into the power and prestige game. But that is not who you are, IF you are really on this journey with me. If only we could 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 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 in a way that increases and enhances life for others and the world. That is why the Son of Man has come, not to be served, not to gain power 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 wielded 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 trying to gain power and influence, to get what we want for ourselves, elbowing 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 in our own habits of thinking and living. Yet, it is consistent with 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. We are made to be "channels of God's love and forgiveness," as one of our disciplines says. 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 to which Jesus calls us. I know now, in light

of Mark's story from which the words of that hymn come, as well as in my own experience, that our "yes, we are able" is always a mixture of eagerness and the reality that we never fully understand what we're getting ourselves into. Fuller understanding can only come as we make the commitment and the journey, with open and teachable spirits.

Kaye and I have often said, half-jokingly, that if we had known what we were getting into, we probably would not have done it. Getting married at what, these days, seems a very young age. Saying no to war and moving to Boston for two years of work as a conscientious objector. Adopting our son Kent and having our daughter Shelley, all within two months. 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.

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. Yet 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. It is the discovery in our own experience that the truly liberating and joyful life springs from the journey of love that is willing to struggle, even suffer, and is always teachable, willing to grow into fuller understanding.