

October 21, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Lord, We Are Able!

Isaiah 53:4-12 *Out of his anguish he shall see light....*

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

Just prior to our reading from Mark's gospel (10:32-34), Jesus is walking toward Jerusalem with his disciples and others who are described as being afraid and amazed. Maybe they sense the danger ahead. Maybe Jesus' talk about the way of his suffering and death is finally sinking in, getting real. Jesus stops on the road, huddles up the twelve, and tells them once again how it will go. The Son of Man will be handed over, condemned, mocked, flogged, killed. Then he will rise again, but who could know what that meant?

Again Jesus has made it clear that his way is the way of love that is willing to suffer. It is ironic, if not comical, that James and John then approach Jesus privately, saying "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 whatever you want—health, wealth, power, success, assurance of an afterlife or that you are right and everyone else is wrong. It is cultural, consumerist Christianity. Jesus is made into whoever we want him to be—endorsing our hate, our prejudice, our wars and other violence, our nationalism, our greed. We want you to give us whatever we ask!

Jesus must have been very frustrated at times by his disciples' failure to grasp what he was about and what the life of faith is really about. He might chastise them, but he never belittles them. He takes them where they are and tries to deepen their understanding. Okay, what is it you want me to do for you? Well, when you come into your glory, 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. Jesus will be top banana and his followers will be rewarded for their faithfulness by having positions of power and status.

The scene is actually embarrassing. James and John still 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 about the way of the cross, of finding true life through self-giving, not getting something for ourselves, through servanthood and not gaining power over others, through dying to the ego, our smaller self, so that we find the true, larger Self with its capacity for love.

Jesus responds: Do you know what you are asking? Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink, the life of intentional love that is willing to suffer? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, the immersion of yourselves completely in God's loving purposes and the death of the old self? If you really want to be part of this new life that God is bringing about, you have to change, wake up. You have to die to the way of living and thinking 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, something we think we need, just can't live without. But Jesus has a way of deepening us so that we begin to see that it is not about getting what we want, but giving all we have and living life in a whole new way.

The disciples readily respond: We are able! Their response is bold and eager, even if they still don't really know what they are in for. Jesus 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 and understanding they have. Over-zealous or in fear and trembling, with much understanding or not having a clue, 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 tries to convince us is important and real.

Jesus now tells James and John that he doesn't even 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 or recognition, some payoff down the road. Live it because it is right, it is true, 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 can flame 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 learning and growing. 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 the many opportunities we have to grow more and more out of the old, smaller self, and into the large, true Self.

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. 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.

If you want to be the greatest, says Jesus, then work at being the servant. If you want to be first in line, then learn the joys of being 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 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 a way that gives life to others?

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 truest 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 fearful 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 never failed to touch that desire to follow Jesus, whether I had much understanding of it or not. 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.

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 finding in our own experience that the liberating and joyful life is the journey of discovery and recovery of who God made us to be and what God calls us to do.