

October 18, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

We Are Able!

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

In Mark's gospel, Jesus repeatedly makes it clear that his way is the way of love that is willing to suffer for the sake of others, for the sake of God's reign of love. He talks with his disciples and others about his own suffering, rejection, and death that will come as a result of his radical faithfulness to the vision of God's realm on earth. It is ironic, even comical, then, that James and John now approach Jesus privately to ask for special treatment. These brothers were nicknamed "sons of thunder", maybe because of their blustery approach to things. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." That is one way of coming to Jesus, and a very popular one these days. 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 an endorser of our hate, prejudice, materialism, wars and other violence, nationalism, greed. We want you to give us whatever we ask!

Jesus must have been very frustrated by his disciples' failure to grasp what he was about and what the life of faith is really about. He chastises 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, Jesus, 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 order and establish God's kingdom once and for all. Jesus will be top banana and his followers will be rewarded with positions of power and status.

James and John have not 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, 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 with which I am baptized, the immersion of yourselves completely in God's loving purposes, which will mean the death of your old, self-centered 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. But Jesus deepens us so that we begin to see that it is not about getting what we want, but giving of ourselves, living in ways that enrich life around us in peacefulness, compassion, and just relationships.

The disciples readily respond: We are able! The word used here is *dunamis*, from which we get dynamite. It means power, ability, capacity. The disciples have the power, the ability, the will to follow Jesus. Jesus never doubts that. He assumes they can do what he is teaching, that they really can live the life God created us to live. Here again we see how the scriptures are NOT about "original sin", our being born sinful and unable to be what God made us to be. Jesus assumes we can live the life of faithfulness to God, and yet he knows that it is not without difficulty, even suffering.

The disciples' response is bold and eager, even if they still do not really know what they are in for. Jesus accepts their willingness. Jesus shows respect for his disciples even when he knows their understanding is incomplete. Over-zealous or in fear and trembling, with much understanding or not having a clue, 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 with which he is baptized. 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 then tells James and John that he does not even have the power to grant what they ask for. It is for those for whom it is already decided. That is Jesus' way of saying that these things are in God's hands. So, forget about it! I think Jesus means, 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. It is about becoming who we truly are as God's beloved children.

By now the other disciples are aware of what is happening. James and John are

trying to get 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, we really get hooked. We think we are all humble and don't care about recognition or reward or status. But let someone try and get some attention or recognition, and the jealousy can flare up in an instant.

So Jesus huddles up the disciples again. He keeps on teaching. 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, in relation to others or ourselves. Our egos or narrowness of vision get in the way. Yet these are opportunities 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 for growing 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 is how it is. They buy into the power 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. All of that is emptiness, vanity, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says. 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, free of ego, free of attachments to things that do not ultimately matter, free from the competition, beat-the-other-person game. The way into this kingdom I am talking about, says Jesus, is servanthood, living your life in a way that increases and enhances life for others and the world. It is about cooperation and mutual loving. 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 does not want to be worshiped! And he for sure does not want to be made into a religious weapon wielded over others. That is contrary to the nature of who he is and all that 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 on the downward path of servanthood, living our lives in a way that gives life to others? And today more than ever, are we living in a way that is harmonious with the rest of the creation, and not in destructive conflict with it?

The life of following Jesus is the most challenging thing we will ever undertake. It runs counter to just about everything in our culture and in our instilled 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, by enlarging our love.

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 stir up 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 are getting ourselves into. Fuller understanding can only come as we make the commitment and the journey, with open and teachable spirits.

That is what this church has always been about, making that commitment to the way Jesus teaches and on which he leads us. It is about recovering our able-ness to be who we were created to be. This is a community of recovery. Recovery from the "lording it over" mentality that saturates and drives our culture, and destroys lives and the life of the creation. Recovery from the false life that is dominated by the smaller self, the ego, and growing into our true life, the life of ever-expanding love. When I came here thirteen years ago, I thought I knew pretty much about all this stuff, but it was only by being part of this community through the years that I grew more deeply into the reality of the life of love to which Jesus calls us. It has taken being part of a community of commitment, accountability, and working with spiritual disciplines or practices, for the growth, the real change to happen. When I leave, I will take this with me, all that we are about through our emphasis on commitment to and being accountable for growth in the life of love, and the

spiritual practices of membership in this community. It has become who I am. I have talked with the Covenant Members about my continuing to be a Community Member even though I will be living away. I thank them for their openness to and support for this. What I have found being part of this community is something that will always be with me and in me. And it is what you as members are finding, and will offer for others to discover as well. It is the realizing, the awakening in us, of the life to which Jesus calls us, the life of God's realm of love.