

“What is it You Want Me to do for You?”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Mark 10:35-45

21th Sunday after Pentecost: 17 October 2021

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“We secure our friends not by accepting favors but by doing them”

Thucydides (471 BCE - 400 BCE), *Peloponnesian War*

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Context: [32] They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, [33] saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; [34] they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mark 10:32-34).

Hear the day’s lesson:

[35] James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” [36] And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” [37] And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” [38] But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” [39] They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; [40] but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

[41] When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. [42] So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. [43] But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, [44] and whoever

wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. [45] For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:35-45).

For those of you who keep track of such things, today's lesson follows Jesus' third prediction of his passion—which is to say a forecast of Jesus' death and resurrection. Usually this is the great theme of Lent. "Passion" is a word that seems to startle the anxious and fainthearted: "Passion"? Awkward. Usually, in our culture, when we hear "passion," we think about strong emotions—like about football or "Big Tex." The word "Passion" we often link to either enthusiasm or romance. When Mark writes about Jesus' "Passion," he writes about Jesus' suffering and death which Jesus endured during Holy Week. This time was when the political/religious authorities betrayed, arrested, whipped, crucified, and killed Jesus. Within this framework, "Passion" simply means "suffering." Mark's Gospel identifies three distinctive occurrences when Jesus predicted his passion, death, and resurrection to the disciples. Jesus limited each prediction to the twelve.

The first prediction we see at Mark 8:31-32. This occasion followed Peter's confession that Jesus was Messiah. Jesus' rebuke of Peter then followed because Peter criticized Jesus' understanding of God's messianic mission for him.

The second passion prediction comes at Mark 9:30-32. The disciples argue as to whom would be greatest in God's Realm. As Jesus spoke about his death, they disputed as to whom would occupy the seats of honor near Jesus in his glory.

The third passion prediction arises at Mark 10:32-34. It occurs between Peter's frustrated exclamation that "we left everything to follow you," and James and John's request for "good seats" in the kingdom of God. Mark's portrait of the disciples is much too human—and none too flattering!

At times people speak to one another at cross purposes. Jesus spoke of his suffering and passion. The disciples speak of their sacrifice and the places of honor that they think they deserve. This reminds me of the story about a man who smelled like a distillery who flopped on a subway seat next to a priest. His tie stained, his face plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He calmly opened his newspaper and began reading.

After a few minutes the disheveled fellow turned to the priest and asked, "Say, Father, what causes arthritis?"

"Mister, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap, wicked women, too much alcohol, and a contempt for your fellow man."

"Wow," the drunk muttered, returning to his paper.

The priest, thinking badly about what he had said, nudged the man and apologized. “I’m very sorry, I didn’t mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?”

“Oh. I don’t have it, Padre. I was just reading here that the Pope does.” I suppose it is difficult for human beings to communicate on the same page.

Jesus’ passion predictions plainly explain that Jesus’ disciples simply do not understand Jesus’ message. The disciples are all about achievement. They dream of kingdom glory, places of honor, and greatness. Jesus faces a harder truth—betrayal, suffering, and death. The predictions reveal the gap between the disciples’ view and what they will experience. They respond with perplexity, dread, and escape.

Are we, perhaps, something like this? Do we prefer talk of success rather than submission? Do we fancy ease over affliction? Would you and I rather contribute our 10% rather than “take up our cross?”

Jesus’ passion predictions remind us that ministry in the Realm of God has to do with self-denial, cross-taking, and daily dying with Jesus. For as Jesus himself tells us: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35).

A reality that Mark drives home is that we almost always overvalue our skills and dedication to a task. Jesus asks James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Of course, they did. We often sing the words in church:

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

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

Refrain:

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.

Thus, we too answer Jesus’ question: “We are able.” When we volunteer our merit and dedication a little too quickly, we are like James and John—we as disciples overestimate our contributions.

Authentic discipleship is about steady growth and learning about the disciplined life. Discipleship is a life-long process and a process that John Wesley called “sanctification:” God working in us to make us perfect in love in this life.

All this is to say, we grow into discipleship—we don’t simply volunteer into it. Discipleship takes time and discipline. We don’t—indeed we can’t—force the process. Rather, it is a process that God

carefully guides us into. Mark underscores the disciples' frailties, shortcomings, and ignorance. But God also gives us grace because—God knows—we need grace.

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