

“Are You Able?”

SUMC, Salado, Tx 76571

Preaching Text: Mark 10:35-45

16 August 2020—11th Sunday after Pentecost

“Tact is the ability to describe others as they see themselves” (Abraham Lincoln).

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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).

[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).

It is challenging to recognize and witness to God’s kingdom when there is an obstacle hindering one’s ability to see that kingdom clearly. Today’s lesson relates a story of envy and distrust among the disciples. James and John make a request of Jesus that irks the other ten disciples—and quickly creates factions. In Mark’s Galilee story, we see believers dividing into factions. Factions make working together impossible. The factions Mark’s Gospel refers to plays out in other local New Testament congregations. For example, First Church Corinth had factions. It was common knowledge. Everyone in the city who cared to know, knew about these factions—sometimes called parties. The church even organized its everyday membership around a few spiritual leaders.

Amusingly, Paul taunts the church. He calls these Corinthian church folks a bunch of babies. They can't handle adult or solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2). Rather, they are still drinking milk—and we know that milk is for babies. Paul even uses for himself the provocative metaphor/analogy of a “nursing mother.” To combat factions, Paul discounts human wisdom. He also counsels that any good that comes to people is a result of God alone who gives the growth.

Our lesson from Mark today reminds us how little fissures of conflict creep into the faith community. A little of this type of behavior, and then a little of that kind of conduct, and soon we have factions or cliques or camps or splinter groups inside the Body of Christ. This fragmenting is not conducive to following “one God . . . [and] one Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:6). A quick reading of our lesson will reveal at least two primary topics. It is first about listening. Second, it speaks to a modern word with ancient history of practice: “being entitled.”

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A first major theme of this lesson concerns the lack of real listening. Real listening we hope leads to authentic hearing. Readers should be shocked when they encounter (Mark 10:35) James and John, Zebedee's sons' request. “Allow one of us to sit on your right and the other on your left when you enter your glory.” In context, it is an ill-timed appeal. Jesus has just issued his third passion prediction—about his condemnation, death, and resurrection. It is like someone telling another that the courts have his/her child to prison and them then immediately asking if the parent might do them a favor. Awkward!!

I have a retired preacher friend in Arizona who told me that one day he went into a drug store as he suffered from a number of various maladies. He brought these items to the counter: Extra Strength Tylenol, a bottle of Kaopectate, some Dristan, an elastic knee support, a vaporizer, some Preparation-H, and medicine for cold sores. As he left the counter, the salesperson said, “Have a nice day.”

Listening is hard work and hearing anyone out is a precious gift. Perhaps it too bad that James and John and the other disciples were not attentive to Jesus' words. All Jesus' words would have edified the twelve.

A second chief subject of this lesson from Mark concerns entitlement. James and John, excluding the other ten disciples, request that Jesus treat them as “privileged characters.” They feel as if they are special—which in the end created a rift within the community we know as the twelve.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, a classic illustration of entitled sons, the younger forgot the respect that was due his father (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32). No respectful or self-respecting child would ask of his father (or mother) for his share of the inheritance while

the parent was still living. Inheritance, like most things in life worth having, is a gift and not a right, entitlement, or privilege. This story is quite appropriate today as we live in what some might call an “entitlement world.” I suppose this means that many of us want people to define us by our alleged privilege or rank—we are often, according to our reckoning, certified as superior. In the world that many of us grew up in, on the other hand, other people’s definition of us pertained to our moral fiber and our character. Of course, what the elder brother suffers from is entitlement too—it just comes to us in an altered costume—it is entitlement even so.

A man was sitting on his front porch one day when a stranger came down the street. The stranger walked up to the porch where he was sitting and handed him a \$100 bill and silently walked away. The next day at the same time the man was sitting on his porch watching for the stranger. Sure enough, down the street came the stranger, walked up to the porch, handed him another \$100 bill and walked away without a word. The stranger repeated this odd and drama every day for a week. On the eighth day the stranger came down the street as anticipated, but this time he passed right by the house where the man was sitting on the porch. The porch-sitter jumped up and ran after the stranger, shouting: “Hey! Where is my \$100 bill?”

If there is one characteristic, we Christian believers need help in expressing more thoroughly and more earnestly, then it is the attitude of thanksgiving. Entitled people rarely show appreciation. Instead they believe offering a word of thanks is too garish. They put their trust rather in some sort of human entitlement. My father used to say that there was nothing worse than an “ingrate.”

Let us pray:

New every morning is your love, Great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen (UM Hymnal, page 877).

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