

Chasing the Centerfold

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Mark 10:35-45

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Okay. Here we are. Jesus' very last teaching before Mark's gospel takes a turn in chapter eleven and Jesus enters Jerusalem with palm branches waving and triumphant cheers ascending. We are at the pinnacle of Mark's gospel and have spent the first ten chapters building to this moment. It's kind of like the major recital after years and years of practice or the big presentation to show just how much we learned. From here on, Jesus' life will descend into chaos, first the celebratory chaos of Palm Sunday and then into the chaos of betrayal, arrest, abandonment, sham trial, and crucifixion. Mark will spend the last half of his gospel detailing those events in Jesus' life. But here we are at the climax and the pinnacle and all the walks along the shoreline, sermons on the mount, ministry to every town, every person, every station of person, healings of sick, resurrections from death, touching the hem of garments, all of that has happened. All the miles from Nazareth to Galilee, Jerusalem to Jericho, Capernaum to Caesarea Philippi, all of them have been logged. Lessons have been learned. Sermons given. Parables taught. Conversations late into the night had. We are at the eureka moment, when suddenly we are released from the darkness and blindness of our world and begin to see things as they really are. We are headed to that parent-teacher conference where we are going to get a full culmination of everything that has been learned, everything that has been gained, everything that has been accomplished in the name of Jesus. We are rounding third base and headed for home and ready to make the crowd go wild. We are rounding the final curve and hitting the final stretch and letting it all hang out.

And it is at this moment that two of Jesus' star pupils and most earnest disciples are ready to bring it all to together. 'Teacher,' they ask eagerly, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' Okay no need to be anxious or alarmed here. We have hymns and prayers about God fulfilling our needs and wants so maybe the disciples were going to ask for something noble, maybe for world peace, maybe they are going to try to be like Hobbits, and ask to give everyone presents on their birthday rather than the other way around; or maybe they are going to ask for extra help or extra credit or some more parables and teachings to digest. That would be a really good thing for the disciples to ask for. Show Jesus they are putting in maximum effort; show him they are still trying to learn; show him they want to know more. They have been with him since he called them to leave their nets and follow him. They have struggled with his parables, witnessed his miracles, sat at table with all the undesirables Jesus welcomed alongside them. They have participated in his kingdom and seen the new heaven and new earth breaking into their world through his life. They know what he is about. They are ready to stand on the

mountaintop with him and bask in the fullness of his life, teachings, presence. And with all that background and all that swirling around, Jesus is probably ready to hear what their deepest desires and greatest longings are. 'What is it,' he asks 'that you want me to do for you?'

Remember...in the very next moment, Jesus will turn his face to Jerusalem...what will lie ahead is his arrest, passion, and crucifixion. What a feeling of accomplishment before all of that to celebrate the growth, wisdom, and accomplishment of his disciples. Over and over, Jesus has patiently showed them that that way of faith and discipleship often emerges in our lives as self-denial, sacrifice, putting the needs of others ahead of our own, and more than once Jesus has said that those who strive to be first must be last of all an servant of all (Mark 9:35). These lessons have been emphasized and learned. And now is the moment for the disciples to show they fully get it; especially these two over-achiever disciples. Everything has led up to this moment. It is all about to culminate. Here we go...here is what the disciples ask...'Grant us, to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in glory.' Translation: put us in the centerfold of your feature display. Make us front and center in your divine exhibition, one on your right and one on your left. Elevate us. Make us a little more superior and special. Make us your insider-super-special-top shelf disciples. Just like email or text or maybe sometimes in letters, it is really hard to measure or gauge emotion here or read between the lines. For instance, Mark does not tell us that when the disciples asked Jesus to be granted special treatment at his right and at his left in glory that Jesus immediately did a face palm. But it sure feels like the opportune time. Either that or the opportune time for Jesus to lose it once and for all on all these people who seem to miss the mark and whiff at every critical moment. Maybe they are just not good under pressure. After all the teachings, all the parables, all the eccentric ways of life, the disciples are still chasing a different type of kingdom than the one Jesus has in mind for himself and for them. They are chasing a centerfold; they believe that jockeying to be the centerfold of Christ's kingdom is what life is all about. After years of teaching, years of practice, years of trying to be good disciples, they still don't get.

Preaching and worship professor Tom Long tells the story of a childhood mother's day breakfast in which he and his brother decided to surprise their parents with a 'homemade' breakfast in bed. He recollects inexperienced exuberance that marched into his parents room with plates of 'ten-minute eggs, carbonized bacon, and biscuits that would challenge' an expert stonemason. In spite of their fumbled efforts, it was, the parents said as they devoured it, 'the most delicious breakfast they had ever eaten.' 'Love,' he adds, 'is evidently a wonderful spice.' When we come to worship, Long reminds us that 'we come like children filled with adoration, carrying our ineptly cooked but lovingly prepared liturgical breakfast. On the menu are prayers of which we know not the depth, sermons barely finished, hymns haltingly sung, the Word clumsily spoken.

And there is God, like a parent patiently waiting to receive with relish and grace and kindness the burnt offerings we bring.¹

We can read Mark's gospel and think that Mark really makes the disciples almost into cartoon characters and daft caricatures who show little promise, no signs of improvement, and who even up to the very last moment of Jesus' ministry are chasing after the wrong things. As much as we would like to see spiritual growth and enormous progress made, they seem to continue to be captivated and ready to chase after a kind of discipleship and kingdom that will make them special, grant them access, and elevate them above the rest of humanity. And in spite of their lack of measurable results or improvement, Jesus does not bat an eye but continues to offer them a life that seeks to be in solidarity with all humanity, a life that is willing to endure their unfaithful ways, a life that perseveres through our obliviousness even when we are confronted with divine grace. Again and again, we see a God who refuses to be humanity-less even when human beings choose to be godless, we see a Savior who refuses to be disciple-less, even when the disciples constantly pine for a more conventional Savior or think they can game the religious system and get ahead. The only hope for the disciples is not some kind of self-improvement and spiritual progress, but in being taken into the life of this person who keeps living the life of what a faithful human being should be and who makes room for them within his own life, even when they bungle it, miss the mark, overcook the prayers, long for the wrong things, and think their main purpose in life is to vie for the centerfold page of Jesus' kingdom.

Recently I listened to an interview with former presidential candidate Andrew Yang who recently became a political independent and is trying to start a new centrist party called the Forward party intended to break the duopoly of politics in our country. One of the things he mentioned about the global pandemic, especially in terms of business and workforce and technological efficiency, is that the pandemic expedited the future. It put a lot of developments that were happening on fast forward especially as automation and artificial intelligence and robotics take on a lot of labor that used to be done by human beings. As you all are aware, churches have not been untouched or left unscathed by these developments. In the last years, we have had to think about whether online communion really is the sacrament of the Lord's supper, or how to build and sustain community when 'being together' has been radically altered and redefined. Our habits have changed; maybe our priorities, too. Whether the future continues to come faster, I do not know, but the church of today and tomorrow will have a significant role to play in the future, helping us all navigate through the technological progress and robotic lifelessness to the mystery that continues to be at the heart of our humanity, point us toward a community of mutual dependency rather than one of self-sufficiency.

¹ Tom Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, vii-ix.

I think what shines through painfully clear in Mark's gospel is that the disciples are not so much a window to a distant group of underachievers long ago, but a mirror of ourselves here and now. We see in them our own misplaced longings, our willingness to elbow each other out of the way in order to 'win' at Christian faith, and our hope to be the centerfold of our own story. But that's not all we get from Mark; we also see a flawed but resilient group of people who learn that true faith is less about getting life right and more about depending on this Savior who loves us in spite of our tendency to get it wrong and who purposely sticks in with people who miss the mark, miss the point, crash and burn, and yet who reflect their own stubborn, joyful, persistent faithfulness to be called his community and his people in spite of themselves.

In Tom Long's words, no matter how much we may learn, we are still 'kids in the kitchen overcooking the prayers, half-baking the sermons, and crashing and stumbling through the responses on the way to an act of adoration.' And we find our true selves, not in getting it right or becoming expert or successful Christians, but in sharing what we have, valuing the currency of our relationships over all our other balance sheets, and embracing our dependency rather than chasing the life of self-sufficiency.

Ultimately that is what your pledge is and commitments to our church's mission is...not only a financial commitment, but a commitment to God and to each other, an act of hope that declares we cannot find our way in this world apart from this community, it is an investment in each other where our deepest joys, most meaningful moments, and transformative encounters happen as we lose ourselves in an act of adoration. That's probably more gratifying and enjoyable than the competing with each other for the centerfold.