

“On the Road to Jerusalem”

Mark 10:32-45 *NRSV*

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New London UMC

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We begin the season of Lent on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus. And on the way Jesus pulls “the twelve,” his inner circle of disciples, off to the side for a little conference. It would seem that Jesus wanted to be sure that the twelve have heard and understood what he has already told them twice: that in Jerusalem he will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes to be condemned to death; then he will be handed over to the Romans who will mock him, spit upon him, flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again. . . . Could Jesus be any clearer? Because when WE hear what Jesus says, it sounds crystal clear to us, doesn’t it? . . . And yet, it seems like Jesus’ words just bounce right off the ears of the twelve. We understand that they DON’T want to hear that they are on the road to Jerusalem to witness Jesus being condemned to death by the chief priests and scribes; and to see Jesus be crucified by the Romans! Just picture this little roadside convo. Can’t you see these twelve disciples bunched up around Jesus, and with their eyes they are silently pleading him to stop talking, while inside their heads they are screaming, “Don’t say it again! Don’t take us there! It’s not too late to turn back now! There must be at least a million other villages we haven’t been to yet, that are far, far away from Jerusalem! Please tell us we’re going to go to each and every one of them!”

Or maybe that’s NOT what the disciples were thinking, or wishing, or hoping, or wanting to have happen? Were the sons of Zebedee the only ones who seemed to skip over Jesus’ gruesome prediction of imminent death to instead focus on the promise that after three days he would rise again? Do they see him rising into glory? And do they feel that they are uniquely qualified to be seated in the positions of highest honor at his immediate right and left hand? Is that what James and John have been daydreaming and scheming about while Jesus was talking about being condemned, mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed? Because it certainly seems that way as they walk right up to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Seriously, boys? You want Jesus to DO **WHATEVER YOU ASK OF HIM**? For pity’s sake, James and John, this isn’t about YOU! Well, that’s how I would react. So I admit I’m surprised when Jesus doesn’t reply to them, “What is wrong with you? Didn’t you listen to a word I just said to you?” Instead Jesus replies rather neutrally, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they explain. And then Jesus explains, “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?”

We might think that Jesus’ response would stop James and John in their tracks, or at least cause them to reconsider what they’ve requested. That after hearing Jesus tell them flat out that they DON’T KNOW WHAT THEY ARE ASKING they should perhaps ASK what Jesus means about the cup that he drinks – whether this is a positive or a negative thing? Or maybe they should ask if he’s referring to some other baptism than the one he received from John the baptizer? But James and John didn’t even pause before they say,

“We are able.” . . . That was a pretty big assumption for them to make, wasn’t it? They assumed that WHATEVER Jesus was going to go through, they would be able to go through it with him. Now why did they think they’d be able to do that? Probably because they’ve been with him since day one when he first called four fishermen to follow him, to be his disciples and learn how to fish for people. And if Jesus has needed them to be with him ever since that time, then they intend to continue to follow him all the way to his ultimate place in glory. James and John want to see this through even though Jesus tells them that they don’t know, they don’t fully understand, what it’s going to take to get what they want. But if they want to *try* to be able to do this, then the cup that he drinks will be the cup that they will drink. And the baptism that he is baptized with will be the baptism that they will be baptized with. However, Jesus doesn’t assign seats in glory.

Meanwhile the other ten disciples are ticked off by James and John acting like they should be at the head of the line to be with Jesus in glory. And Jesus has to reconvene the group discussion with all twelve disciples to remind them of what he’s been trying to teach them all along: that the way that they live and work together is meant to be, and should be, DIFFERENT! They can’t use the Gentile power structure of lording it over one another! They shouldn’t be pulling others down to climb over them to be their leader and ruler! No! If any of them want to be the “greatest” of them all, then they must seek to serve them all. Because the example that Jesus has set for them is that he came NOT to be served, but to serve. And that’s why he will give his life to ransom – to save – to redeem – the lives of many. . . . And, yes, that really is point of their trip to Jerusalem.

Now we might think, “Wow! It’s like Jesus is trying to herd cats by keeping these twelve disciples focused and clear about what they are supposed to be doing, and why they are going to Jerusalem!” . . . But we could also be thinking: “Wow! We are SO LIKE those twelve disciples! We are constantly getting distracted and going off on our own tangents and forgetting that as followers of Jesus we should be serving instead of wanting to be served!” Because don’t we sometimes think about how it would be if we were in charge, if we were the Big Boss, and what it would be like to have folks kowtowing to us? . . . And if it were up to us, would we choose to head toward certain danger? NO! A thousand times NO! We will actually work at avoiding demanding situations or having to go to hard places. And we seriously do NOT want to follow Jesus into the valley of the shadow of death! So we certainly don’t want to be on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus. This is NOT a trip that we want to take. . . . But this is where we are going if we want to follow Jesus. . . . Which means we have to ask ourselves, “Are we able to do this?”

This calls to mind a hymn that I struggle with, #530 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, “Are Ye Able.” I always find it hard to sing the words of this hymn that Earl Marlatt wrote in 1926. The question raised by Jesus in the first verse is, “Are ye able to be crucified with me?” And it’s one thing to then sing that the “sturdy dreamers” are able to answer, “Yes, to the death we follow thee;” but it is quite another thing to immediately

follow that by singing, “Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine. Remold them, make us, like thee, divine.” Our remembering that James and John said that THEY were able is not at all like knowing in our very core that WE are able! Can I truly say that I am able to be crucified with Jesus? I cannot glibly or honestly say, “Yes!” to Jesus if he is asking me to come and die with him today.

But what I can say “Yes!” to is being willing to try to take a step, or two, in the direction of being able. Do you know what I mean? I think I can get myself to take a few baby steps in that direction. That’s why I appreciate the prayer of Saint Francis, which is #481 in ***The United Methodist Hymnal***. In this prayer I can see some steps that I can take with Jesus’ help, with God’s help, with the Holy Spirit’s help: to counter hatred with love; to be ready to offer pardon or forgiveness; to use doubt to find my way to faith; to move from despair to hope; to look for the light of Christ; to bring joy where there is sadness. And if I can start taking these steps then I’ll be better prepared to: console, rather than to be consoled; to understand, rather than to be understood; to love, than to be loved; to give, than to receive; to serve, than to be served. I might even be able to find that in dying I can be born to eternal life. . . . These are the steps I need to take if I’m going to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

I pray that you will also be able to take the steps you need to take, the steps that will enable you to continue to follow Jesus.

Amen.