

October 21, 2018

Mark 10:35-45

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“A Servant’s Heart”

I have a friend that lives in Florida. I have known her for five or six years. She and her husband offered me rides to their church when I went to seminary and then graciously opened their house during my first semester of internship at their church. Her husband passed away about two years ago and she sold her house in Columbus and moved to their winter house in Florida in Mexico Beach. Of course we all have heard about hurricane Michael that left an aftermath of devastation and death in the Florida Panhandle. When I heard about it, I immediately contacted my friend to make sure she was okay. She sent me pictures of her house. It was nearly destroyed. Picture after picture showed the horrible damage that has been done to her house where the memories of her husband lived. This past Wednesday I put a notification on my calendar to call her that night. When I came home though, I saw that our house looked like a disaster. We had a person coming to our house the next day to help us with a project. And I knew that I cannot have our house in this condition, so I immediately started to clean despite the notification on my phone to call my friend. As I washed the dishes and was putting them away my notification to call my friend kept buzzing and I ignored it. Then as I was almost done with the dishes, this thought came to me, but it did not come to my mind, it came straight into my heart and pinched me, and it said, “Are clean dishes and the house more important than calling your friend?” This thought was so clear and so powerful, that I said to myself, “Of course, my friend is more important! What am I thinking? How could I do this?” So I dropped everything and had a great conversation with my friend over the phone. And then I thought, how come I did not do it in the first place? I could not believe that I could not see what was more important. That happens to all of us when we are fixating on something that is not as important, not as urgent, not what God has calling us to do in the moment.

John and James, in the passage for this morning, had the same problem. They were fixating on something that was not that relevant at the moment. They were worrying about what kind of glory, power, and honor they might receive when Jesus will be in glory. It is a pretty strange reaction to what Jesus had shared with them prior to that moment.

You see this morning's passage is situated in a part of Mark's Gospel where Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. And during this journey, Jesus predicted his death and resurrection three times. And all three times the disciples had the strangest reactions. When Jesus told about his death for the first time, remember Peter rebuked Jesus and then Jesus rebuked Peter and called him satan. The second time Jesus predicted his death, the disciples decided to argue who was the greatest among them. And after the third time, James and John asked Jesus to be seated to the right and to the left of him in his glory. It is like they missed the whole conversation and the point of the whole journey. The words of Jesus were flying into one ear and out the other. They heard it three times that their master and teacher would be mocked and killed. And all they can think of is their own security, their own glory, their own honor, and their own power. "What about me?" "Where am I in this picture?" "What's in this for me?"

We have done this many times. I have. With our families, at work, in public. What do I gain from this? Can I be right there at the center of power, and success, and everybody's attention? Our culture "okays" this kind of behavior and thought process. Our culture "okays" and encourages us to be the greatest and the first and the best and it is okay if we get there by misusing and abusing the power, as they say in Russia, "by walking on people's heads." It is ok to misuse power just to get closer to your goal.

Speaking about misusing power and authority, the Midterm elections are only two weeks away. You heard some tone of cynicism in my voice, I am sure. It is because I grew up in post-soviet Russia and things were very different than here. I will tell you about it in a moment. But here before the elections we are all receiving ads in the mail. We see the ads in everybody's front yard. Our favorite TV shows and YouTube

videos are being interrupted with the election ads. And part of the ads is usually about their opponents. I have always been amazed by the election ads here in the US. A person running pours dirt on their opponents. Growing up in post-soviet Russia, I remember hearing politicians saying only the good things that they would do if they win the election. They would raise pensions and salaries, they would bring jobs, and improve the infrastructure of the cities and build playgrounds for the children. But in a chaos of “perestroika,” that is when the Soviet Union collapsed with its Communist regime and the new government formed, I learned to know that people in the government never did anything that they promised to do during the election campaigns. They got to their right and left seats of honor and glory and used it to advance their own interests and not the interests of the people. They stole money that were given to them to improve the life of the citizens. They sent the money offshore and continued to get more money only for their own profit. That is why you heard some cynicism in my voice.

Jesus talks about this in today’s passage. He talks about the lords of the Gentiles, the rulers of the Roman Empire. They were tyrants. They misused their power and authority to oppress others. And Jesus said, “but let it not be so among you. If you want to be the greatest, you must be servants. If you want to be first, you must be slave of all.” Jesus used the examples of the rulers and kings because originally, the rulers and kings, and even our government are given power to serve the nation, to help the people to fulfill their needs, to use their power to empower. And that is what Jesus our king did for us.

Jesus’ cup is the cup of fate and ultimate calling from God to suffer and die on the cross. And Jesus’ baptism is the baptism of giving himself away fully and rising up again in glory. All of it out of love, out of his deep calling to bring the world wholeness, reconciliation, hope, healing and peace.

When James and John were requesting their seats next to Jesus in his glory, they had no clue that the glory of Jesus is the glory of the cross. The glory of Jesus is the glory of mocking, flogging, and spitting. The glory of Jesus is the glory of suffering and brutal death. The glory of Jesus is the glory of humility. You see, the word humility comes from

latin word *humilis* that means “low.” It is an attitude towards oneself that sees oneself as lower than others but not in a diminishing way. But in a way that recognizes the needs of others first. Humility is about recognizing that everything belongs to God, including glory, power, and honor. Humility is about getting down low and lifting others up. Just like Jesus did. Humility is about serving others. “whoever wants to be the greatest of all, must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be the slave of all.” The word servant is translated as a person who served towels at bathhouses. The word slave is a person who is fully given to the will of their master.

We are called to be servants and slaves of our master Jesus. We are called to use our power to encourage others and help others. As the elections are coming, our right to vote is power given to us. We can use it for improvement of our country. We can use some humility as sometimes we tend to think that the world revolves around us. And somehow I think suffering might be included in our discipleship.

My friend whom I called on Wednesday night is a deeply devoted Christian, and has been her whole life, she served so many people, helped so many people in need. When I talked to her on the phone, at first she said that she was emotionally numb from all that loss that she has been experiencing for the past two years. But then she said, “You know Katya, I truly believe that somehow, someday God will use all of this for his own glory.”

Suffering is a mystery and we will probably never know why that happens. Jesus’ calling and glory was in his suffering. I am not glorifying suffering and I am not saying that we must suffer to be disciples of Christ, but because suffering is such an unavoidable part of life, part of our journey to Jerusalem includes our suffering.

Today’s teaching is very challenging for us. And we might feel like we can’t do it, we feel like we are failing. We are just like the disciples do not get it most of the time. But remember the question that Jesus asks the disciples, “What do you want me to do for you?” Instead of asking the places of honor and glory to the right and to the left of Jesus, let ask Jesus to give us a servant’s heart.

May we use our power not to abuse, but to empower, to encourage, to lift up. May we see others' needs first. And may our hearts be a place of a humility and grace where Jesus reigns. And may our suffering be our offering of sacrifice to God. Amen.