

“Sitting On the Right Side”  
B Pentecost 21, Mark 10:35-45  
October 17, 2021; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
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### The Request of James and John

<sup>35</sup> 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.” <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup> 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?” <sup>39</sup> 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; <sup>40</sup> 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.”

<sup>41</sup> When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> 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. <sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

LIFE: It’s not a competition!!

### I. QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS!

Don’t you love how *everybody* wants to ask Jesus a question?!

“Hey, Jesus! Is it okay to get a divorce?” “Hey, Jesus! What do I need to do to have eternal life?” “Hey Jesus, how come WE

couldn’t cast out that demon like you did?” “Hey Jesus! When you’re sitting all up there on the glorious throne, can my brother and I have dibs on the chairs to your left and right? You know, the places of highest honor?”

Say what?!

There’s a saying, “Ask a silly question, get a silly answer....” (I love that!)

“Ah, boys. You have NO idea what you’re asking!”

The question *seems* to come out of left field, yet just a few verses earlier the whole batch of disciples was asking Jesus about the “warranty” on all this. “Jesus, who can be saved, anyway? We’ve left everything to follow you—remember? Is there some kind of guarantee that you’ll remember us after the election? You know, when you’re appointing your cabinet positions and all?

### II. EVERYONE WANTS TO BE AN EXPERT

Before we scold the disciples *too* much, or snicker at their impertinence, we should consider what it would be like if we ourselves were in their position. You’ve taken the risk, left family and security behind, worked on the campaign, and you want to know what the return on your investment will be.

Or, maybe just that all your hard work will pay off and there will be a promotion, some recognition that you’ve made it. You’re ready to be acknowledged as an expert, a leader, a **SOMEbody**.

Back in the 1960s and ‘70s Presbyterian pastor Charlie Shedd was noted for his writings related to family and parenting issues. He wrote the well-known books, *Letters to Karen* and *Letters to Philip*. Books of reflections about life and faith written to his own children. Shedd begins one of his later books this way:

“How to Raise Your Children”

This was the title of one of my finest efforts. Like all good speeches it had unity, order, movement. It *electrified*, edified, specified! It grabbed them quick and held them fast with humor, pathos, drama!

All over the Midwest I gave it. They paid me a handsome fee and were glad to get me. “This guy will *wow* you!” That’s what they said, and the people came. With high hopes, they came for “How to Raise Your Children.”

*Then we had a child!*

That sound you just heard was the great elocutionist falling flat on his face. My majestic speech had been totaled. Those brilliant ideas had such a droll sound at 2:00 a.m. with the baby in full cry!

In my defense I want you to know this—I kept on trying. I changed my title to “Some Suggestions to Parents,” and charged *bravely* on. Then we had two more children and I altered it again. This time it came out “Feeble Hints to Fellow Strugglers.”

### **III. INSIDE TRACK**

Who among us doesn’t want to be an expert? Or at least feel, at times, like you have the inside track? To see a return on our investment—to know the person or the cause that we’ve championed is the *best* one, will make a difference, will come out okay in the end.

And, that we will have SOME sort of assurance of that, or role to play in the next chapter? That our efforts will come to fruition in some visible way?

Is that the motivation of the disciples? To know they’ve contributed in some significant way to the world and what goes around comes around?

### **IV. JESUS’ RESPONSE—YOU DON’T GET IT!**

When the disciples want to sit as close to Jesus as they possibly can, have the best place and the inside track, Jesus’ response is, “Oh, you have no idea!”

These two brothers have lived intimately with Jesus for some time, but they don’t seem to grasp what intimacy with Jesus is all about.

He had JUST said!:

33 “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

James and John “get” that Jesus is the Real Deal. But they do not understand the nature of the deal!

“The Romans are going to kill me,” says Jesus, “in a way that they have perfected through practice to cause the *maximum* possible amount of shame and pain for the longest possible time.”

And James and John reply, “Well, after that’s all done with, could you give us the best seats in Paradise?”

It’s chilling to stop for a moment and remember that a little ways down the road, two thieves will be at Jesus’ right hand and left hand. *Dying* alongside of him. *And*, in fact, James and John and the other disciples did face pretty gruesome ends themselves, years later.

In hindsight, their question is chilling in its audacity and total lack of understanding. They think Jesus is going to Jerusalem to establish the messianic kingdom by exerting power and authority over the world. Jesus knows *his* power and authority to bring in the reign of God will only come by being the suffering servant of the world.

## **V. NOT THE WAY IT WORKS**

And then, the other 10 disciples come in from playing outside and get wind of the two brothers' attempt to "be the favorite." They are torked, to say the least.

But, are they mad because James and John had the audacity to ask the question? Or, that they didn't get there first?!

And Jesus, in his ultimate patience, sits them down and says, "Now, one more time, this is not the way it works.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

"We have heard this teaching so many times that it is all but lost on us. The end of the line is the best place to be. The lowliest job is the one to covet. Those who serve are luckier than those in power and lovers of God get less status, not more.

It is *incomprehensible* in terms of the world we live in. Things simply do not work that way. The only way to make any sense out of it at all is to think of it as some sort of intermediate stage, like boot camp or parole. Do your time as a servant with no whining and win two good seats in the kingdom to come.

"It doesn't work that way,' Jesus tells them *one* more time. He is not pretending to be a servant *until the time comes* for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne; he is a servant through and through.

The good seats are not his to give. He does not even

have one himself. Someone else is in charge of all that, someone he is too shy even to name, whom it is his sole pleasure and purpose to serve.

"He is not in it for reward," Taylor concludes. "He is in it for the love of God, which promises him *nothing* but the opportunity to give himself away.

The best seat he will get this side of the grave is a throne full of splinters, and when he is hung out on it to dry by the powers that be, it will not be James and John on either side of him but two unnamed bandits, one on his left and the other on his right." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995, pp. 43-44).

## **VI. CALLED AS PARTNERS—NO RIGHT OR LEFT HAND**

There is, ultimately, no such thing as the right and left hand of God. Really no pecking order in the Church. Or there shouldn't be! Everyone is on the same level—that of a servant. No one "has God's ear" anymore than anyone else.

Perhaps, instead of drawing lines, we should be drawing one huge *circle*. No left or right at all. And inside the circle, touching each and every person, is Jesus, sharing the cost and joy of his cup and baptism with us.

37 "Arrange it," they said to Jesus, "so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory—one of us at your right, the other at your left."

"I'll arrange it alright," replies Jesus. You're all partners. Partners in service. Not sitting next to God, bending God's ear, or speaking *for* God. You are called only to serve and to give your life for many.

If you are the president of the bank—serve somebody.

If you are the janitor in the local school—serve somebody.

If you preach—serve somebody.

If you listen—serve somebody.

If you are a millionaire—serve somebody.

If you don't have *two* dimes to rub together—serve somebody.

### **“GIVE HIS LIFE AS A RANSOM FOR MANY”**

(SALT) This phrase is frequently interpreted as supporting ways of understanding the cross as a kind of ransom payment to the Devil (as in some “Christus Victor” theories) or to God (as in some “penal substitutionary” theories), in order to secure humanity’s salvation. But here Jesus mentions no such need and no such payee — strange omissions if that’s really what’s on his mind. So strange, in fact, that he must have other ideas.

What ideas? Well, for starters, a “ransom” is something of value given for the sake of liberating a captive—and in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus does indeed come as a healer and liberator. But what particular **captivity** is highlighted here?

Q: “It’s not captivity to demonic forces; nor is it captivity to an unpayable debt owed to God. On the contrary, it’s the disciples’ captivity to self-centeredness, and to conventional notions of power, prestige, and supposed “greatness.” Even last week’s story of the rich man ...helps fill out the picture of the **prison** from which Jesus intends to set us free.

“Following Jesus means liberation from the cell of self-absorption, opening us up to God and neighbor in humility, generosity, and love—which is to say, opening us up to true servanthood.”

“Thus the phrase, “to give his life as a ransom for many” amounts to a poetic way of saying, *to pour out his life in servanthood to humanity, even in the face of fierce opposition—and so at once to show us the way and to liberate us into living it.* The incarnate Son of God gives something of value—his life—for the sake of our freedom, our learning to follow him along the Way of being a “servant of all” with humility, generosity, love, and grace.”

SYNOPSIS: “Though the phrase “to give his life as a **ransom** for many” is often interpreted as supporting an atonement theory of penal substitution (in which Jesus suffers a punishment in our place in order to satisfy divine justice), Mark’s overwhelming focus here is on the true greatness of servanthood as opposed to the world’s conventional, self-absorbed, counterfeit forms of greatness.

In place of these self-centered illusions, Jesus calls his disciples to the humble, down-to-earth way of servanthood, a life of genuine greatness seeking to serve, not dominate; to descend, not ascend; and to humbly, justly, beautifully love, not arrogantly jockey for position.