

Service in Light of the Kingdom

Throughout this Lenten season, we have been asking what would it look like if Jesus joined us walking along a road, and how would this challenge us? And what I have found is that the answer we find largely comes from who we think Jesus is in the first place. So, when I ask “who is Jesus,” what do you immediately think of? Does a piece of artwork come to mind? Maybe something similar to the stained glass behind me? Do you imagine him hugging a lamb, laughing with children, or do you think about something he’s said? As we do this, our minds are constructing a version of Jesus made up of all the information we have gathered about him.

Our brains work a lot like blocks. When we ask our brain “who is Jesus,” it compiles and stacks all of the information to create a picture by recalling, he was a white man kneeling by a stream, he was incredibly loving, he spoke in perfect King James English, or he was a wonderful teacher. And when we add a more complex idea, like he is the savior, we have a dozen more images piled on top of that one. Like, he is the savior from what? Hell and a pitchforked devil? Saved from earth to go live up in the clouds? Saved so we don’t have to abide by “the Law” anymore? But, inevitably along our journey, we encounter new, trustworthy data that contradicts what we have constructed, and as we force it into our created picture, the whole thing comes crumbling down. We are then left with three choices regarding our blocks: We can either give up and walk away, we can reconstruct our previous picture with a new wobbly block at the bottom of the stack, making the structure that much more ready to fall again, or we can discard the pieces that no longer fit and construct something closer to the Jesus of the Gospels.

Just like us, the first hearers of the Gospel had their own assumptions of what a savior and Messiah were supposed to be. Some imagined that the Messiah would be a great warrior, like kings of old, and come to conquer the Romans and make Israel into a great and powerful

nation again, for others still, they believed the Messiah would only come if the people would obey God's Law the way *they* thought it should be followed, and others believed that we had been duped: God would not be sending a Messiah at all but instead, the people were to retreat into solitude and devote their lives to solemn worship. But, when Jesus came, he broke everyone's categories for what the Messiah should be and what he was to accomplish.

The Gospel of Mark makes use of this crisis and turns it into one of its major literary features. In its first half, Jesus begins his public ministry and continually breaks the mold of everyone's preconceived notions about him. Now, get ready for this rollercoaster ride: Jesus, this peasant from a backwater town, is baptized in a river by an eccentric, locust eating hermit, chooses lowly illiterate fishermen to be his disciples, and goes around driving out evil spirits, healing people of disease and sickness, forgiving people of sins, which only God can do mind you, then sits down with the religiously unclean to eat! He saunters up to the religious leaders of the day and says that HE is Lord of the Sabbath, the sacred holy day of his religion, and then debates the scholars of the day and leaves them astonished with confusing teachings and parables, but then runs away in secret to not gain notoriety! Mark makes this one thing clear: *every-single-person* who met Jesus could not fit him into a preconceived category.

In the second half of Mark, where we find today's passage, Jesus moves from his public, outward facing ministry and returns home to Galilee to spend intense quality time teaching and discipling the 12 individuals of his inner circle before turning to Jerusalem to face his crucifixion. But we readers are shocked, because, despite spending months with Jesus and hearing his teachings every single day, the disciples are also oblivious to *who* Jesus is and *what* he was all about, but if we're honest, we too would most likely be dumbfounded if we encountered the living Messiah in front of us. So, as we approach today's text, let us do so

humbly and not be blinded by the familiar caricature we have crafted ourselves, but instead, let us seek for the Jesus that challenges and reshapes it. Amen? Let us turn to the Word of the Lord:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” - The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In last week's text, we saw Peter get rebuked for denying Jesus's prophecy concerning his death, and here, we have Jesus's second prophecy concerning his death. Despite the disciples hearing it a second time, they were just as baffled, but now they are scared to even ask Jesus what it means - I mean, do you blame them? Peter was just called Satan for questioning this same thing! For us looking back, it's a pretty obvious prophecy, especially in this season of Lent and Easter. We know that Jesus is going to be crucified and resurrected. While there are a lot of explanations about what this accomplishes, one central claim is that Jesus, God incarnate, does

for humanity what they cannot do for themselves, and he does it in servitude, out of love, and not out of obligation or a promise to be paid back.

The cross as an act of servantly love is something thoroughly foreign to the disciples, and this otherworldly idea creates a rather ironic backdrop for the following story. After their arrival at a home in Capernaum, probably one of the disciple's, Jesus inquires what they had been arguing about on their journey. Again, they are left speechless because they were squabbling about who is greatest amongst them. While it might seem rather odd to us, in first century Palestine, this was a pretty common occurrence in a society built on social hierarchy. Towns, families, friend groups, places of work, all had hierarchies, and it wouldn't have been out of place for 12 head-strong men to bicker about who was the leader amongst the group. But that would never happen today would it? While it's still a mystery to them, we are so embarrassed for the disciples to be acting this way following Jesus's profession of self-giving sacrifice moments before. Really?! Now you're arguing about who is greatest?

But remember, this half of Mark shifts with Jesus turning inward to teach and prepare his followers by offering one of his most famous teachings: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," obviously flipping the disciples' argument and inner desire on its head. While he could leave it there, Jesus articulates service in a particularly elevated way by placing a child as the pinnacle of one to be served. Now, in our society, this isn't a radical thing. We largely respect children, we have special laws protecting them and ensuring they have what they need to grow, we try to offer them the best education possible, and when we see a child being wronged, we seek to come to their defence, but none of this was necessarily the case in the first century.

While *we* view children as innocent and unspoiled, the first century saw children as totally dependent on others for nurture and protection, and thus, they themselves could offer nothing to society and were simply seen as a leech on society. Historian and theologian Father John Donahue harshly explains, “A child [in the first century] was a ‘non-person’ and one could not expect to gain anything either socially or materially from kindness to a child.” In short, a child in the first century was someone who had no capital, nothing to repay service back with. And this is the key to Jesus’s teaching, the Kingdom of God Jesus was coming to inaugurate was one marked by radical servitude not just to children but to those that could not offer anything in return. It’s lost on us, but Jesus didn’t *just* preach this to his disciples, he practiced it right in front of them! In the first century, a child would not be allowed to be anywhere near an intimate meeting amongst men like we see in today’s story. But instead, Jesus has flipped the social custom of his day on its head and shown the utmost honor and dignity to a member of the lowest class by *already* having them be a part of the inner circle and proclaiming their equality within the group.

If we just take the meaning of Jesus’s words at face value and say, “yup, I’ve honored kids! It’s expected in 21st century North America! So check that off the list, Jesus, I’ve knocked it out of the park!” We’ve missed the point entirely! Jesus has come to create a Kingdom in which Godly rule is inaugurated by an act of servant love that cannot be repaid, and its reign looks like servant love to those that society would brush off as unimportant and invisible. To make this resonate more, we have to ask ourselves, “who are those in our world that are deemed to be drains on society, those that are considered ‘non-persons’ amongst us, and have no capital to give us in return?” Those that seek to follow in Jesus’s teachings have to put this radical call in its proper place of prominence.

Now I can't spell out exactly how *you* can fulfill this Messianic calling as it largely depends on who *you* are, *your* sphere of influence, and the capacity *you* have to serve, but I do want to prep our imagination by providing some modern day examples of what Kingdom-based acts of service might look like. For example, when you choose to hire an individual with a disability knowing that the "capital" their employment could offer the business might be less than that of others, you are serving in light of the Kingdom. When you choose to volunteer your skills, labor, or knowledge by helping someone paint a wall, move furniture, or learn about local resources, you are serving in light of the Kingdom. When you choose to offer housing to someone who has a record that might usually exclude them, you are serving in light of the Kingdom. When you choose to invite that crazy uncle over with the off-the-wall political views to dinner, you are serving in light of the Kingdom. When you choose to intervene and advocate with your friend's recovery, you are serving in light of the Kingdom.

This week, pastor Trevor was speaking to one of our friends next door in the Mercy Center, and in describing what it's like for people to pretend they don't see you, he said, "People look at you when they want something from you. But when you don't have anything they ignore you and don't see you." This truly emphasizes our point: in our capitalist society, we are trained to see value only in the capital an individual can provide to us. Whether it be helping us climb social ladders, get that new job, make us feel loved, our egos fuel how we interact with others. In the Kingdom of God, no one comes with a price tag, and all are equal, but Jesus's act of service is to purposefully put to death the emphasis placed upon us by our culture. Serve because it is right and good, just as God would do, and not because we could receive something for ourselves or make our lives better or any easier.

This call to acts of service is a holy submission to the new way of exemplifying Christ's ultimate act of service on the cross. This gives new resonance to the command, "take up your cross and follow me." I encourage you to ask yourself, is this the Jesus we crafted just a few minutes ago, the one we built with our mental blocks, is this the Jesus that we truly know? Is this the Jesus that we claim to follow? Or maybe, the Jesus we have seen today is foreign to you and you want to leave here today holding on tightly to the blocks you had previously gathered. But consider our text's final statement, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." If you haven't met the Jesus of today's sermon, or maybe you've been asking how you can know him better, I encourage you to embody our Savior's radical call to service, reflect a cross-shaped life by being what others cannot be for themselves, and I guarantee, as our text promises, you will welcome God there in your service in light of the Kingdom. Amen.