

“Heading Down the Ladder of Success”

Mark 10:32-45

Faith United Methodist Church
6810 Montrose Rd
Rockville, MD 20852

Janice Harmon, Minister of Care, Connection and Inter Gen Nurture
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SCRIPTURE:

A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³² They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; ³⁴ they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

The Request of James and John

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

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

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Growing up, I heard from my parents and teachers I could be anything I wanted when I grew up. Did you hear that too?

What did you want to be?

A doctor, a scientist, a fireman or woman, an actor?

I always marvel at the people who knew what they wanted to be and journeyed into their dream.

My husband Phil and I are children of the 60s and 70s and he aspired to be an revolutionary. And when he got to college he realized no one was hiring for that position.

Me, I wanted to be a point guard in the National Basketball Association, preferably on the NY Knicks. I’m from North Jersey... they were my hometown team. I was going to be a **star** like Walt Frazier and Earl the Pearl Monroe.

We all have aspirations. Dreams of where we are heading. How successful we will be. We have lofty goals. There is nothing wrong with dreams and goals. In fact, the Bible says where there is no vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18)

We all plan to climb the ladder of **success** all the way to **our** dreams!

However, today’s scripture and all of Jesus’ teachings speak to the upside down nature of the Kingdom of God. To be successful in our faith journey we don’t climb the ladder of success to our dreams. That’s the world’s way.

When we follow Jesus, we head *down* the ladder of success in service to our God and neighbor. We submit. We surrender our all.

How does that sit with you?

Heading down the ladder of success. If it sounds off or feels uncomfortable or a little prickly or scratchy we are feeling our American cultural bias rubbing up against our faith in Jesus. The call of our God to live and dream differently, to aspire to a transforming set of norms.

Let’s walk through Mark 10:32-45, placing ourselves in the text. Today, we are John and James the sons of Zebedee. We are the sons and daughters of a country that tells us that rugged individualism is the way to climb the ladder successfully. We are the sons and daughters of **some** national leaders who promote individual rights above the all else. We are the sons and daughters who may align our daily lives more on the American Way, rather than the Jesus way.

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Mark 10:32-45

We are heading down the ladder of success today. In service to our God and neighbor. We are dreaming, we are in service and living and loving to transform our community in Jesus Name. What would it mean if you and I did more than talk-the-talk and instead we supported this transformed-up-side-down life with our finances, our committed time, and shared our talent? What would our fall festival look like? What if a dozen families in our congregation supported the children of our neighborhood by:

Sharing their finances

- Buying the decorations from Party City or Amazon to decorate your car.
- Buying candy to hand out.

Sharing our time

- Spend a couple of hours in our parking lot on Saturday greeting our neighbors
- Handing out candy

Sharing our talent

- Making DIY decorations for our trunks
- Decorating and carving pumpkins at a craft table

Honestly, this is lowest of low hanging fruit.

What would it look like to be truly reconciling? Who would we invite to watch online or sit beside us in our pews and work alongside us in ministry? Jesus is teaching today, let's learn what it means to walk down the ladder of success?

The Disciples called Jesus Rabbi, teacher. Throughout the Book of Mark our Savior has been giving instructions to his followers. In our text today, the Disciples think that Jesus is going to institute his kingdom immediately. Jesus will start ruling this earthly kingdom and kickout the Romans. So, in light of this 'understanding' James and John make a request. "Lord, grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Again, they don't seem to understand what Jesus has just meticulously explained to them in verses 32-34.

The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again. Maybe hindsight is 20/20 but that seems really clear to me.

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But maybe there is another viewpoint, maybe James and John could have thought, ‘hey get your requests in while he’s still around.’ I don’t know if you did this when you were kids, you said to your friends ‘hey if I die, you know or if you die, can I have your bike or your Playstation? You know... get your request in and ask, ‘Hey Lord, you know when you go to the cross can we sit on your left and right in the place of authority?’

In Mark’s gospel, the Disciples are just that childish.

Jesus responds to James and John (the Sons of Zebedee) and he doesn’t deny that he will be seated on a throne and that he will have his kingdom. In verse 38, Jesus says to them you do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism that I’m baptized with? And they say right away, “yes, we are able.”

Doesn’t that sound like children? Or someone young in our walk with Jesus? We sing songs like “I say yes, Lord yes, to your will and to your way.” Saying yes, to God, means picking up your cross and following Jesus.

It means, picking up your cross. (turn to the other side of the church). It means, picking up your cross.

Does your life reflect that you have picked up your cross to follow Jesus.

Does your life in this church reflect that you have picked up your cross?

Does your life beyond these walls reflect that you have picked up your cross?

Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said “when Christ calls a man (or woman) he bids them come and die.” Die to the things of this world. Die to our egos and self-centeredness.

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He was crucified falls with His face to the ground and prays to His Father, “if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” And James and John answer so quickly, yes, we are able to drink from this cup?

Jesus says to them, okay, alright, you know what... you will **indeed** drink the cup that I drink and experience the same baptism. Because Jesus knows that James will be killed by the sword ordered by King Herod in the 4th chapter of the Book of Acts. And John would be exiled to island of Patmos where he will die.

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Let's keep working our way through this text.

Verse 40... Jesus explains to James and John that who sits on his right hand and on left in glory is not his to give but it is for those for whom it is prepared.

Jesus is saying... guys listen, you really don't know what you're asking there is a different law ruling the kingdom of God than what rules the Earthly empires.

God decides who prepares the place for who will sit at my right and left. I am not king of earthly pursuits.

You head down the ladder of success in God's kingdom to fall on your face and pray in total surrender. To submit your finances, time, and talents in service of others so they may learn how to journey this way.

That's why last week's text is so hard for us. You remember the rich man who does not want to sell all that he owns to follow Jesus? Give up everything (even all of my shoes) to follow Jesus? Yikes, I guess I am, we are, that camel trying to fit through the eye of a needle.

You will often hear me say that following Jesus is simple but it surely is not easy! Oh, this is hard!

When the 10 hear what James and John asked Jesus they are greatly displeased. Maybe not from **righteous** indignation but because the Sons of Zebedee thought to ask Jesus before they had a chance to!

But Jesus calls them and says, “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. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Our Savior is offering a prescription for the healing of his disciples' misguided desire for power in the upside-down instructions of service and sacrifice.

The request made by the Sons of Zebedee shows a desire for personal greatness that Jesus redirects toward kingdom purpose. And we (remember we are the disciples) are invited into greater participation in paradoxical upside-down mission. This mission will take us to the cross, where the ultimate authority of Christ will be revealed through the offering of his life as a ransom for many.

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Jesus offers himself in **our** place.

Ransom carries a negative connotation in today's world but in Roman culture it was not so. It meant that even prisoners of war or slavery could be set free. You just needed to offer the correct payment.

Jesus has done this for us in the most fundamental and powerful way. The fee for our lost ways? Jesus. Payment in full.

The fee for our intentional stubbornness. Jesus!

The fee for our addiction to materialism and self-centeredness. Jesus!

We have been slaves to living and serving the wrong masters:

The masters of position, security, status, money, climbing. Everyone is a slave to some sort of master of greatness but Jesus says, *I come not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for you, and you, and me.* The many.

Jesus is saying don't serve those fake masters. Stop trying to climb the ladder of success. I'm going to give my life as a ransom. I'm going make the payment so that you can find your greatness and your power in me.

And when we build our lives upon the foundation of the gospel in Jesus Christ **there** we will find that abundant life of joy and peace that we are searching for.

This upside-down kingdom asks us to go against the current.

I pray we learn from the Sons of Zebedee today.

Let's head down the ladder of success to serve our God and neighbor.

Amen.