

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

Mark 10:32-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 18, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 32 through 45. It is on page 716 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, two disciples ask for something really awful, and, graciously, Jesus doesn't give it to them. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 32, we read in Jesus' name.

³² And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he 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 delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up 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 do 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 Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" ³⁹ And they said to him, "We are able." And 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 And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes I find the Bible to be quite funny. And this is one of those passages. There's actually something very humorous about it, but it would probably be more funny if the joke wasn't about people dying and Jesus disciples being really, really sinful and foolish. But despite all the death stuff and sinfulness of Jesus' disciples, this text is still kind of funny.

This text is kind of a continuation of the Gospel lesson from three weeks ago. I don't know if you guys remember sermons from three weeks ago. I only sort of remember them some of the

time, and I'm the guy who actually writes the things. Anyway, in that lesson, which was Mark 8:27-38, "[Jesus] began to teach [his disciples] that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). And we noted that this was a turning point in *The Gospel of Mark*. This was the point where Jesus began to focus his teaching on the necessity of the cross. Up until this point, the focus was on Jesus' *identity*. His miracles and teachings served to reveal Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God in human flesh. But that conversation, which we considered three weeks ago, was the point where Jesus' teaching shifted from his identity to his mission, which is his death and resurrection. And it wasn't just that one time that Jesus told his disciples about this. Mark records three almost identical conversations about the necessity of the cross.

We considered the first of these conversations three weeks ago. And we're kind of skipping over the second one. That one occurred in Mark 9:30-32. Jesus basically just said the same thing he did in Mark 8, but the text says the disciples did not understand what he was saying, even though the words themselves were very clear. And then we get the third passion prediction in the gospel lesson for this morning.

This conversation takes place while they are on the road to Jerusalem. If you peek ahead just a little bit, you'll notice that the Triumphal Entry is just ahead of them. So it's maybe a couple days before Palm Sunday. This puts us within about a week of Jesus' crucifixion. And in this passion prediction, Jesus becomes very specific. Previously, Jesus had talked about the elders, chief priests, and scribes rejecting him (8:31), but he doesn't say who actually does the killing. But here Jesus specifies that it will be the Gentiles (10:33). The leaders of the Jews will condemn him to death, and then they will hand him over to the Gentiles—that is, the Roman authorities—and then **"they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him"** (10:34). This is most shameful. This is the worst of both worlds. He is rejected by the Jews and defiled by the Gentiles.

The disciples had a hard time accepting this. Even though it ends with Jesus rising from the dead, they couldn't get past the whole death thing. The stuff about Jesus being rejected by the leaders of the Jews and also defiled by the Gentiles was just too much for them. They could not believe that any of this was good, and they could not believe this would actually happen to Jesus.

We see this when two of the disciples—James and John—come up to Jesus and basically act like that conversation never even happened. They say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (10:35). Now this is a non sequitur if there ever was one. It doesn't follow at all from what Jesus was just talking about. And this is a really terrible way to start a conversation. Try this when you go to work tomorrow. Walk into your boss' office and say, "Boss man, I want you to do whatever I ask of you," and see how that goes. But Jesus is actually patient with these two brothers, and he decides to play along. He says, **"What do you want me to do for you?"** (10:36) And they say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (10:37). And in a roundabout way, Jesus denies their request.

But he doesn't come right out and say, "No." He recognizes that they still don't understand what he must do, and they still have a distorted view of Jesus' glory. So he says, **"You do not know what you are asking"** (10:38).

And this is the part of the text that I find most humorous. I also think this is the real key to understanding the text. So I want you to pay attention to this: What did James and John *think*

they were asking for, and what were they *really* asking for? Because whatever they thought they were asking for was not in line with what Jesus knew was coming.

So paint the picture in your mind. What were James and John thinking of when they asked to sit on Jesus' right and left in his glory? If they were thinking in earthly terms, perhaps it's a picture of thrones, or at least positions of authority when Jesus becomes king in Jerusalem. Or if they were thinking in heavenly terms, then it's basically the same picture, except it's in the New Jerusalem instead of the old Jerusalem. Whether it's an earthly or a heavenly image, it's a picture of power, authority, gold, and fancy robes. This is what James and John *think* they are asking for. But Jesus says, "**You do not know what you are asking.**" The picture in Jesus' mind is apparently much different. So what image does Jesus have in his mind?

The Bible actually gives us this image. It describes for us Jesus in the height of his glory. And in this picture of Jesus in his glory, there is a person on his right, and there is a person on his left. Do you know who they are? Can you see the image in your head? Think of the person on the right, and think of the person on the left. Are they James and John? No; it's two other guys. We know that John, at least, was standing nearby (John 19:26), looking at this sight, but he was not actually in the picture. He had to watch as two other guys were on Jesus' right and on his left in this image of glory. Can you see this picture now? If you can't see it yet, let me help you out: "And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left" (15:28). So there was a guy on the right, and there was a guy on the left. But they weren't sitting; they were hanging.

That might not have been the image you expected. It certainly was not the image James and John expected. It seems a bit more gory than glorious. But this is Jesus' image of glory. When we consider the verses before this and the verses after this, it becomes quite clear that Jesus is thinking of the cross. So when these two disciples come and ask, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus is quite right when he says, "**You do not know what you are asking.**" And it's true. They had no idea what they were really asking for. The places on Jesus' right and left had been prepared for thieves. James and John thought they were asking for positions of power, authority, influence, and respect. But they were really asking for death.

So Jesus asked them, "**Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?**" (10:38) Jesus is talking about his suffering. He's not talking about a cup of gold, but a cup of suffering. And he uses the term "baptism" in a figurative way to refer to his death—kind of like a baptism by fire. James and John answered that they could do this, though they still didn't know what they were really talking about. And Jesus actually affirmed their answer. They would suffer, much like their Lord suffered. Just as the cross marked their teacher, it would also become the mark of the disciples. But it would still not be James and John next to Jesus in his glory. And it's not Jesus who would appoint the persons on his right and left. That decision was left up to a man by the name of Pontius Pilate, who sentenced these thieves, along with Jesus, to be crucified until they are dead.

This is what Jesus was trying to talk about with his disciples. But they didn't get it. None of them did. So the other ten, when they heard what James and John asked for, "began to be indignant at James and John" (10:41). That means they became mad. *Who do these guys think they are? Do they think they're more important than me?*

We see here that it's really all twelve of the disciples who were in the wrong. It's really all twelve of them who didn't get it.

Sometimes, quite honestly, the disciples say and do some really foolish stuff. Sometimes, as we read through the Bible, the disciples come across as pretty bad. Or, if we're reading the Old Testament, it's the Israelites who come across looking bad. And I know it can seem like we're being kind of hard on them. We see them commit all kinds of sins, and we think, *These guys are terrible*. So it's helpful to remind ourselves, that if we were in their sandals, we would do the same thing. I mean, we're not any better than they were, and if they could read stories about us, they would probably think we're terrible. So we really can't sit in judgment on the disciples or the Israelites. But that doesn't make their sins any less bad. The terrible stuff they said and did is still terrible. So when we recognize that we share the same nature and commit the same sins, that doesn't lift them up at all. Instead, it lowers us down to their level.

And we commit the same sin James and John committed. We still have this same distorted view of Jesus' glory. We still think of glory in worldly terms, rather than the terms Jesus sets for it.

A good pastor friend of mine recently remarked that American Christians—and maybe it's true for other Christians around the world too—but he remarked that American Christians, at least, are too quick to get to Easter (Jason Gudim). We skip over the cross too quickly. We do this liturgically, when we kind of think of Lent as a necessary evil or maybe just as a means of getting to Easter. But even more so we do this in how we think of the Christian life. The "Victorious Christian Life" is far more appealing than a life of suffering marked by the cross. But only one of these is actually something Jesus calls us to, and it's not the "Victorious Christian Life." And I'm serious. Jesus has not called us to be victorious. But he has called us to suffer. We like the Jesus revealed in the glory of this world instead of the Jesus revealed in the glory he chooses for himself, which is the cross. Now, the resurrection of Jesus is certainly good. We can't be saved without it. Let's not diminish the Resurrection of our Lord. But Jesus desires to be known in terms of the cross.

When we think of Jesus' glory, there are a few major events that reveal his glory. The two events that seem the most glorious to us are his Resurrection from the Dead and his Return in Judgment on the Last Day. And those events are certainly glorious, but the high point of Jesus' glory is neither of these events. The height of Jesus' glory is not his resurrection. It's not even his Return in Judgment when every knee will bow before him (Phil. 2:9-11). The height of Jesus' glory was that most cursed day when the only people who knelt before him were those who knelt in mockery (15:19). It's the day he was anointed with spit (15:19). It's the day he wore a crown of thorns (15:17). It's the day his throne was an ugly wooden pole used to execute criminals. And those honored with the privilege of his right and left hands were other condemned criminals. One of those criminals saw the glory of it all, while the other only saw the shame (Luke 23:39-43).

I know this sounds totally backward. I mean, why is the cross the height of Jesus' glory? It is because, in the Kingdom of God,

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“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (10:43-45)

The cross is the height of Jesus’ glory because service is the greatest virtue in the Kingdom of God.

This is the example Christ gives us in his death. But the cross, of course, is no ordinary example, because the example part of it is nowhere near the main thing. The main thing is the service. The God of the universe—the creator of all things—has come among us. And he came not to be served. He came not to receive our praises. He came not to be glorified by men. He came to be rejected by men. And in this act of extreme self-sacrifice, he manifests his glory in the most unexpected way. He “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

While James and John, and you and me go about seeking some way to glorify ourselves, the one person who is worthy of all glory comes to be shamed. And he comes to be humiliated in our place. I mean, the just thing to do with someone who is unnecessarily proud is to humble them. But that’s not how Jesus treats us. Instead, he humbled himself in our place. He accepted the rejection. He accepted the condemnation of death. He endured the mockery, the spit, the flogging, and even the cross.

This was the ransom. This was the payment on our behalf to redeem us from the sentence of death. He has given his life as a ransom for the many. This shameful sight is the height his glory. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.