

“The Bumbling Disciples”
Mark 10:35-45
Sunday, October 18, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

There’s a wonderful story about the King and Queen of Sweden who were attending the 1980 Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York. Trying to get into an ice hockey game featuring the Swedish team, they were stopped by the ticket taker because their tickets were for another game on another day. The King said that the correct tickets were in his car and he asked that they be allowed in without the correct tickets: “Could you make an exception for us, please?” he said. “You see, I’m the King of Sweden.”

The ticket taker responded, “Sure you are, and I suppose this is the Queen.”

The King and Queen of Sweden went back to their car to get the correct tickets . . . only to see it being towed away.

I guess the King and Queen of Sweden are not as well-known in the States as, say, the Queen of England...or the Pope...or our President. The King and Queen of Sweden get no respect.

How about your life? Are you at the place you had hoped to be at this point? We spend our whole lives pursuing dreams and goals. The aim is to go higher, to become greater. To have more perks. That is the mark of success. It even affects our families. We want our children to become doctors and lawyers and engineers. Nobody tries to persuade their children to become servants. What?! A servant? But sometimes God’s way confuses our human wisdom.

In Mark 10, Jesus tells his disciples for the third time about his impending death...

I. The bumbling disciples.

James and John are presented by Mark as silly and greedy and self-promoting. What gall! Asking Jesus for places at his right and at his left in glory. What jerks! And they pretend to be respectful by calling him “Teacher” before they say, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Jesus mimics them with his reply, “What is it you want me to do for you?” He is already implying that he is a master who serves – What do you want me to do for you? At this point it’s rather tongue-in-cheek. Soon Jesus will get more serious with them.

After all, James and John have chosen a very strange time to express their ambition. Jesus has predicted three times that he must suffer and die. After the first prediction Peter rebukes him. After the second prediction the twelve disciples enter into a debate over who is the greatest.

Now, after the third passion prediction – Jesus’ third foreshadowing of his own death -- James and John ask for the best seats in heaven! Jesus has just told them that he will be tortured and ridiculed and killed when they reach Jerusalem, and James and John are already making plans for themselves. “So, Jesus, after you get tortured and ridiculed and killed, and God raises you from the dead – can we, like, be your #1 guys in heaven?”

They are total knuckle-heads. They have completely missed the point of who Jesus is. And let’s not forget that the other disciples miss the point, too. Peter earlier rebukes Jesus over the idea that he has to die. And all the disciples argue over who will be the greatest in heaven.

So when the disciples are indignant with James and John, it’s not like they disagree with what two are asking for -- the best seats in the house. No! It’s because all the disciples want to be at the head table. They don’t want to lose their positions to James and John. An entire dozen of knuckle-heads!

The disciples completely miss the point of who is great in Jesus' eyes. Jesus says that only God can decide who will sit on his right and his left in glory. But Jesus can tell them that greatness comes through selfless service to others. Jesus uses himself as an example, saying that the Messiah comes to serve and not to be served. In addition, the Messiah will die for the salvation of all people. Get it now, you bumbling disciples? Service, suffering and death. These are the cups Jesus offers to you. These are the baptisms with which he is baptized. If you serve as he serves, you will be great in heaven.

The bumbling disciples.

But we are all bumbling disciples, aren't we?

We don't necessarily like to admit it, but we are all stumbling, bumbling along, trying to follow Jesus... more or less... when we feel like it. Often missing the point of the gospel. Often falling down, making mistakes, getting caught up in our own egos, or lack thereof. Thinking too much of ourselves, thinking too little of ourselves. Either way, we miss the point of true humility. True humility is an honest self-assessment, followed by willingness to be of service to others. Jesus washing the feet of the disciples is symbolic of the attitude of service Jesus wants to see in us. Carrying that servanthood to the cross, Jesus wants us to likewise be ready to die for others.

The bumbling disciples don't get it. They continue not to get it.

Again, this is the third time Jesus has talked to them about his impending death on the cross.

This is the third time the disciples, instead of accepting his call to radical servanthood, haven chosen to continue struggling and competing with one other for position and status.

II. We are bumblers, too.

I know how James and John feel. I know how all the disciples feel. They want the approval of their Teacher, the one in authority over them.

We all want parental approval, don't we? Whether it's a teacher, a boss, or the actual parents who live in our heads. We want the approval of those in authority over us. Yes, the disciples are bumblers. But maybe they are also afraid and looking to Jesus for security. Jesus offers an alternate path. Rather than promising comfort and safety and prestige, Jesus offers his kingdom way. The way of servanthood. The way of the cross.

James and John say, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

Don't we ask the same thing all the time, when we pray? We give God a laundry list of the things we need, the things we're worried about, the things we're afraid of.

And Jesus gives us what we need, if we'll accept it. Jesus gives us security, although it's different from the security the world promises. Jesus comforts us in our worries. He offers to us the community of the kingdom, security in God, status in servanthood.

We're stumbling, like the disciples. We don't get it. We may understand the concept of servanthood, intellectually. But we don't really get it. We struggle to make service our lifestyle. We struggle to follow Jesus.

Robert Coles, a Pulitzer prize-winning psychiatrist/pediatrician/professor and social researcher says he has seen babies in a nursery dozing or awake but very quiet. One of the babies will start crying in pain or hurt, maybe with colic, and the other children will respond with their cries, but their cries are not the cry of pain but rather the cry of empathy in response to someone else's pain. These children are not even old enough to have language yet, but they respond instinctively to someone else's cry. You're in the presence of the child's first response

to the outside world and its anguish.

From infancy God gives us the ability to respond to the needs of others. And as adult Christians we have been taught over and over again, “Service, service, service” – this is the requirement of the kingdom. This is the joy of the kingdom. So why is it so difficult for us to grasp?

We know we are to serve the church and its mission. But do we joyfully serve both those inside and those outside our church family? Or do we serve grudgingly because it is our duty? Or do we limit our service to friends only? Where is it that you are stuck in your service for God’s kingdom? Are you afraid to risk something new? Are you resentful that you’re giving 150% to your family or friends and they’re giving back only 10%? Are you resentful that strangers and foreigners and outsiders are receiving 150% of the service of the church and the community while you yourself are losing ground? Each of us must prayerfully analyze our own commitment to service and be ready to change as Jesus leads.

I believe God calls us to find balance. As individuals we need to give time to the church, to our jobs, to our friends and families... As a church we need to serve our brothers and sisters within our church family, and we need to serve those outside our four walls.

One scholar writes about balance: “When your schedule leaves you brain-drained and stressed to exhaustion, it’s time to give up something. Delegate. Say no. Be brutal. It’s like cleaning out a closet – after a while it gets easier to get rid of things. You discover that you really didn’t need them anyway.” (Marilyn Ruman)

III. The spirit of service.

Another take on this idea of balance comes from the story of Marian Anderson, an African American woman who sang at the Lincoln Memorial. She had been scheduled to give a

concert, but the concert was canceled because of her race. So she appeared at the Lincoln Memorial what became an iconic performance. She says, “I could not run away from the situation. I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people. I had to appear.”

Marian Anderson’s spirit of service is captured in the words of an old folksong recorded in the 1970s by a group called “The Fisherfolk.” It is entitled, “The Servant Song.”

Brother/Sister let me be your servant.

Let me be as Christ to you.

Pray that I may have the grace to let you
be my servant, too.

We are pilgrims on a journey.

We are traveling on the road.

We are here to help each other

Walk a mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ Light for you

In the night time of your fear.

I will hold my hand out to you;

Speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping.

When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.

I will share your joy and sorrow

Til we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,

We shall find such harmony
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.

Won't you let me be your servant.

Let me be as Christ to you.

Pray that I may have the grace to let
you be my servant, too.

(This song comes from the Community of Celebration, which recorded under the name “The Fisherfolk” in the late 1970's and early 1980's. They were an intentional community growing out of the charismatic ministry of Graham Pulkingham, an English Epsicopalian whose rebirth began in Houston -- as quoted by Dr. Mickey Anders).

Closing.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best in his sermon, “The Drum Major Instinct.” I’d like to share this excerpt with you:

“I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I'm talking about as I go down the way (Yeah) because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, (Yes, sir) the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. (Amen) Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. (Yes) He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

“He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They

called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. (Glory to God) He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. (Amen) One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. (Lord help him) When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend.

“Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history. All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together (Yes) have not affected the life of man on this earth (Amen) as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one. (Jesus) But today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, ‘He's King of Kings.’ (Yes) And again I can hear somebody saying, ‘He's Lord of Lords.’ Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, ‘In Christ there is no East nor West.’ (Yes) And then they go on and talk about, ‘In Him there's no North and South, but one great Fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide world.’ He didn't have anything. (Amen) He just went around serving and doing good.

“This morning, you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. (Amen) It's the only way in.”

May we follow Jesus as Martin Luther King followed him.

Amen.