

Letting Go of Privilege
A Sermon on Mark 10:32-45
Proper 24
October 21, 2018

Introduction

I attended a seminar on *The Political Jesus* in Wichita last month. Arthur Dewey, a historical Jesus scholar, told us that Jesus was part of a Resistance that had been going on since Egypt. That Resistance continues today.

Jesus' teaching is just as radical today as it was in the first century. Christians today recognize turn the other cheek, love your enemy, and judge not lest you be judged as gospel, but they still haven't sunk in. They still see that as being weak. They don't practice it in their daily lives. People cling to conventional understandings of power and hierarchy. Our history books still glorify political rulers and great men.

We don't understand Jesus in large part because he was a mystic. He was talking about a new way to experience God and the sacred.

First Move: Service Not Privilege

Jesus has been on the road to Jerusalem, teaching the disciples about what life in the new community should be like. They are almost there. It will be Palm Sunday in just a few verses.

Jesus makes his third and final Passion Prediction. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, they will sentence him to death and they will hand him over to the Gentiles. Gentiles here means Romans. Then they will mock him and spit on him, they will whip him and kill him. After three days, he will rise up.

Jesus is conflating the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant. The Son of Man appears in Jewish eschatology, first in Daniel 7, then again in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period. They describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being.

Jesus understands himself as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah as well as the Son of Man. This confuses the disciples. The Suffering Servant is clearly a human figure, unlike the Son of Man, who is a divine figure. The Suffering Servant is abused,

beaten and mocked. He represents Israel, which believes that it has been sent into exile because of its sin.

The Son of Man is all that James and John hear in the Passion Prediction. They want to share in his glory. They want power and privilege. They want to share in the benefits that come to the elite.

I drew a sketch of a pyramid for you two weeks ago. People in Biblical times thought of society as a pyramid with elites at the top. There was no middle class. Everyone else was at the bottom. Their thinking was dominated by the concept of limited good. The pyramid never expands. New value comes into the system only from the gods. Benefits from the gods flowed only to the elites at the top of the pyramid. People at the bottom shared into those benefits only by entering into a patronage relationship with the elites at the top. They pledged their loyalty and service to the elite in return for benefits.

James and John have heard the first will be last and the last will be first. They want to be at the very top of the pyramid. They want to be the ones that the benefits flow through.

That is the way it is in most revolutions. The people at the bottom and the top trade places. The oppressed become the oppressors. The people change roles, but the system does not change.

Jesus describes the system. “Those who seem to rule the Gentiles become masters over them and the great ones of them bring their authority down on them.” “Those who seem to rule” means that God is actually the ruler of the world, that the Gentile rulers only seem to be in control. Power among the Gentiles is all about coercion. People at the top can force the people at the bottom to do whatever they ask.

Jesus says, “But it is not so among you; but rather whoever wishes to become great among you will be the deacon, and whoever wishes to be first among you will be slave of all.”

To be a slave would have been offensive to a Greco-Roman audience. They believed that leaders should be humble and magnanimous, but a slave? Romans considered Jews to be an inferior people, born to be slaves. Thousands of Jews were made slaves under Roman rule. Jesus could be saying that a leader should identify with his own people instead of trying to rise above them.

What jumps out at you in Greek is that Jesus is describing a separate community. He talks about leaders *among* you and *with* you. He is not suggesting that the new community should try to take over from the Romans. The kingdom of God is coming. That is when God will take power away from the Romans and God will rule. Everyone will recognize the true ruler of the universe as God instead of Caesar.

Jesus is telling his followers that until the kingdom of God breaks in, they should form a separate community that runs by different rules from the Romans. This is the Resistance, a new community that will model for the rest of the world how God intends people to live, how God intends for leaders to treat common people, what life in the kingdom of God will be like.

A deacon was a table servant. Women and slaves were deacons. They served men at meals and ate by themselves later. The leader among you should experience life from the underside.

The leaders in Jesus' new community are not to use coercive power. They voluntarily give up power. The leader shall be the deacon of all, the person with no privilege. The definition of privilege is a benefit given to a particular group of people. The leader expects no benefits from being at the top of the pyramid.

The opposite of privilege is service, given freely, without expectation of reciprocity or reward. Leaders will be marked by service instead of by privilege.

Second Move: Drinking from the Same Cup

James and John don't get it. Not because they are dumb. They are reacting as a normal person would react today. Jesus is challenging the wisdom of the age. That is difficult to process with our rational mind.

James and John have heard Jesus talk about the cross but hearing about it is not the same as living through it. Gandhi said that the way of nonviolence is a new understanding of power: "I know this cannot be proved by argument. It shall be proved by persons living it in their lives with utter disregard of consequences to themselves."

Jesus says, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup which I drink or be baptized with the baptism which I am baptized?"

Cup in the Old Testament is a symbol for fate. Accepting the cup means accepting the fate that God intends for us. Cup can also mean the wrath of God. Accepting the cup could mean accepting the wrath of God for an unjust system that dominates and oppresses people. It could also mean accepting the wrath of God by accepting the punishment that should fall on all the people.

Baptism is also symbolic. We think of baptism as a synonym for initiation. To be baptized is to be initiated into Christianity. The Greek word for baptism doesn't mean initiation. It means to dunk or plunge someone or something under water. Baptism carries images of death with it. To be baptized in Christ is to die to your old way of living.

The way to true glory leads through the cross. Δόξα means bright or shining. A secondary meaning is fame, recognition, honor. Glory is about awe and wonder. Jesus is talking about gaining glory by your shining example as a suffering servant, not by power over.

We can't be too hard on James and John. They get it after Jesus is crucified. The Gospel of Mark is written about 35 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Mark's audience knows that James and John went on to become leaders of the church. They know that James was the first disciple to be executed. According to Acts 12:2, James was beheaded by Herod about ten years after Jesus was crucified. James was one of the first martyrs. Tradition tells us that John went on to lead a large group of disciples in Ephesus and that John or his followers wrote the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation.

Third Move: Experiencing a New Way of Life

Jesus offers a model for leadership that rejects violence. Leaders should serve rather than dominate.

It's a model that has never been tried by a secular government. Can you think of a political leader that you would describe as a servant? A slave of all? Someone who rejects glory and wealth? Someone who is Christ-like? It is hard to think of anyone with more privilege than politicians, who have security forces to shield them from the people and who grant access only to their donors.

Jesus' model for leadership hasn't been tried by enough churches. Church attendance is at an all-time low. About half as many people go to church as 40 years ago. Only about a third of the population is in church on any given Sunday. The two out of three people that are not in church today don't see the point in going to church. They don't see Christ at work in the church. They see the same shrill, judgmental voices that they see in the secular world. Trying to dominate people by forcing their opinions on them. Of the one third who go to church, half say that it doesn't have much of an effect on their lives.

Maybe it's a good thing that the church is shrinking. Maybe it will force the church to give up its hope of controlling the government. The church will stop trying to imitate Caesar instead of Jesus.

The church was most Christ-like when it was a small minority, in the three centuries after Christ. Christians were despised because they shared all things in common, they refused to serve in the Roman army, they cared for the poor. When Rome adopted Christianity in the fourth century, the church made its peace with

empire. The church from that time has defended empire instead of challenging it. We have embraced secular values instead of the values of the kingdom.

Stanley Hauerwas, one of the leading Christian theologians, argues that the church should be the church, a servant community. The church should show the world what life in the peaceable kingdom is like. “How could the world ever recognize the arbitrariness of the divisions between people if it did not have a contrasting model in the unity of the church?”

The church is not the kingdom. It is a foretaste of the kingdom. Jesus has given us a glimpse of what the kingdom is like.

The church does not withdraw from the world. It engages the world but it no longer tries to control the world. The church’s calling is to serve the world.

When people think of the church, they should think of people going down to Caminante to help teach Dominican children, people reaching out to prisoners, writing them letters and visiting them, people visiting the frail elderly and serving them communion, people going to Pride Festivals and offering cookies to LGBT people, with no expectation that they will visit their church. People being servants to people that the empire and most churches have no use for.

Those are mystical experiences. We encounter the sacred when we are servants to the invisible people. We see for ourselves a glimpse of God’s glory that is in all people.

We experience the kingdom through mysticism not by logic. Matthew Fox told us this weekend that a mystic is a person who is in love with the world. The way forward for the church is to reconnect with its mystical roots. Let go of its pretensions to power and privilege. Let go of its preoccupation with the written word and rational thought. Let go of the reptilian brain that is full of fear and violence and get in touch with our mammalian brain that is full of intuition and compassion.

Conclusion

That is true resistance. We resist the model for worldly success that has been handed down to us in a direct line from the Pharaohs in Egypt to the emperors in Rome to the Powers That Be today. We fall in love with the world and everyone in it. We deacon them. Not submit to them. Deacon them. Treat them with hospitality. Show them what the true church looks like.