

March 14, 2021
Rev. Jane Florence
“What’s the Point?”
Mark 10: 32-45



We are now only two weeks out from Palm Sunday and holy week in the church year. Mark’s story of Jesus is intensifying. We hear today words that sound familiar if you have been worshipping here for the last few weeks. This is the third time Mark’s story tells of Jesus announcing what is going to happen when they get to Jerusalem. Yet, here they are “on the road, going up to Jerusalem”

This telling sounds much like last week’s story. After Jesus tells them he is going to die, this time the disciples begin to argue. This time in Mark’s telling they aren’t whispering among themselves about who will take over. This time, James and John “come forward to him and ask him” “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. Sounds like’ James and John have grown more bold since last week. Last week no one would ask a question, now they are asking for a blank check. YOU’ve had a request like that before, “Hey, will you do me a favor?” and your reply is “ it depends, what do you want me to do?” Jesus replies the same as you and I do, "what do you want from me?"

James and John say, we want to be your right and left hand men as you come in your glory. How about John gets to be Vice-Messiah and James gets to be Secretary of State Messiah in your kingdom.

Jesus is like - have you guys not heard anything? Three times I’ve said it. I’m not going to Jerusalem to take over the throne. I am not going to be king of Israel. I am going to die. The two guys hanging on my right and left are not going to be in positions of power.

About that time, the other disciples lounging beneath the next tree overhear what’s going on. James and John are trying to wheel and deal with the boss to secure privilege appointment! to get special favors! The others get angry! They cry out, “hey, that’s not fair!! We want to be special too.”

Jesus responds, “You guys, none of you get it. How long have you listened to me teach? How long have you watched me live my teachings? Here we are coming to end of our road together, and you still don’t get me? You are thinking the way the world thinks - seeking power, authority, prestige, living out of self-centered naïveté and self-aggrandizing delusion, that is not The Way I live, not The Way I teach. If you want to be great, you must be a great servant. If you want to be first, you must be first to serve others. Follow me, I came not to be served but to serve.

Yes, this is the same message we heard last week. It comes a few stories after the last time, but the message is the same. It was in the chapter before that too. Chapter 8 and chapter 9 and chapter 10, in our modern numbering system, tell the same message three times. It’s like it is important or something.

There are a lot of church rules or society issues that people try to ascribe to Jesus and say how important they are. Christians fight about the right amount of water for baptism, women ordination, proper confession before communion, these exact words must be said - this creed must be recited - this date must be observed. The church - universal- has split and fought with one another - and killed each other- over so many rules and regs and opinions. What did Jesus say about gay’s? or women? or the date of Easter? What did Jesus say about?

The truth is we really don't know what Jesus said. We don't have a tape recording or transcript of his lectures. We have stories written decades after his life. Stories that his followers wrote down to capture what they believed, what they had been taught, what they have come to understand about what he said. The gospels are short accounts - relatively, if you look at them. All of Mark takes up about 22 pages; that's not really "book." I've written research papers longer than that; it's more like a pamphlet? Google says the average reader can read 22 pages in 37 minutes. I'd say it's a little longer than that, but the point is the stories we have of Jesus are relatively short snippets. There's only a limited amount of space for story-telling, yet the writer repeats the same story three times. To me that says, this is important. You might even say it might be Key, essential, primary even - to his story.

I am asked to tell about my mother. If I write a 22 page story about my mother to convey her life story and three times, I tell you about her cooking. You might notice that. If I told you how every Sunday there was pot roast, mashed potatoes and gravy that was so rich and flavorful. If I tell you about the home made breads, and the smell the yeast dough rising on Saturdays that filled the house, and if I tell you about November cooking for Thanksgiving. How she would cook for weeks, to make the homemade divinity, fudge, pumpkin pie, chocolate cake, and all the cookies! You would probably deduce that cooking was important part of her life. You might even figure out that food was her language of love.

What does this repeated story tell about Jesus? This is what I hear.

First Jesus knew that he was going to get killed for opposing the religious leaders. You don't call the chief priests "hypocrites, and vipers" saying "woe to you" without feeling the pain. Jesus wasn't surprised attacked when he got to Jerusalem. There was no, "whoa, where did this come from? I didn't see this coming." Jesus was fully aware of the consequences of his radical behavior, yet he did not stop. He believed his message was worth his life. He knew if he went to Jerusalem, they would kill him to silence him. So you have to ask what message was worth his life? What message did he believe was essential for others and for the world?

Second, his immediate followers, his closest students, the people he worked with and lived with 24/7, the ones who heard the full lecture on the hillside, the ones who saw him day in day out, the ones who pledged to follow him with all their life, THEY did not fully understand his message.

Third, his is message is repeated at the end of each of these stories. The point of the story isn't the death. The point isn't the struggle to understand it. The point is the lesson he teaches - every time, every time the story is told. It seems to me that is what followers of Jesus should be focused on, not creeds, or doctrines, or books of rules than humans wrote, but the message that he was willing to die to teach, the message that he believed would change the world - and bring forth God's world. and what is the point of the stories? Jesus teaches: let go of your notions of greatness; let go of your need to be better than; let go of your desire for power and SERVE one another. Whoever wants to be truly great, must be servant of all.

We scratch our head and wonder why the disciples didn't get it while we fight about greatness and power.