

“The Good, the Great, and the Glorious”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 17, 2021 – Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 24
Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Mark 10:35-45

Let us pray: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloane Coffin).

Today’s gospel lesson from Mark is found at the conclusion of the gospel’s 10-chapter-long introduction (the remaining chapters of the book tell of the events of the final week of Jesus’ life). Throughout the lengthy introduction, through which we’ve been reading over the course of this year, Jesus reveals his identity and mission to his disciples, but time and time again, the disciples demonstrate that they are too dense to understand.

The story from today’s reading takes places immediately after Jesus tells his disciples explicitly -- for the third time -- that he is going to suffer and die. But -- for the third time -- the disciples just don’t get it. They refuse to believe that they’ve given up everything to follow Jesus only to see him suffer and die, and they are still expecting him to displace Rome by establishing a powerful, earthly realm, over which he would reign with justice, ushering in a glorious new era where the people would finally experience peace and prosperity.

This is the realm being envisioned by James and John, the sons of Zebedee, when they come to Jesus and ask to be seated at his right and left hands when he comes into his glory. They are not thinking of Jesus gloriously reigning in some heavenly realm or over a spiritual reign of love, but of Jesus establishing a glorious, physical realm on earth, just as the realms of the Romans and the Herods, within which they lived. And they desired to be co-rulers of this realm.

James and John longed for Jesus (and themselves) to be glorious or great in the way of the other rulers named as such, rulers like Herod the Great and Caesar Augustus (meaning the Great Caesar), who ruled over Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus’ birth, or Alexander the Great, who reigned over their land and people centuries before they did. But Jesus of Nazareth was not to become Jesus the Great in the ways of these great rulers, who were not considered great

because they were exceedingly good, especially not by the standard of goodness taught by Jesus, that is by being full of love for God and others. No, these great ones were great because they were exceedingly powerful and grew the size and power of their realms during their reigns.

And so, once again, Jesus tried to correct the disciples' understanding of who he really was and what he really came to do. He explained -- once again -- who his disciples were to be and what they were to be doing. Jesus was a servant, who would give all for the sake of others. He would be lifted up, not on a glorious throne above others, that they may bow down and worship below him, but on the humiliating Roman cross, where his naked and bloodied body would be displayed to remind people of what happens to people who even hint at messing with the rule of Rome. Likewise, Jesus' followers were not to be mighty rulers over people, but were to be humble servants of people, becoming truly great and glorious only through their service to others.

Such is the wisdom of God, which is quite different from the wisdom of the world. This is why the disciples, depicted throughout Mark's gospel as dummies, struggled to really understand Jesus. It's easy to pick on the disciples for their lack of understanding, faith, and willingness to embrace Jesus' message, but the disciples are characters in the gospel that are meant to remind us of ourselves. They operated with the finite wisdom of humans just as we so often do. They struggled to trust and follow Christ, just as we often do. They wanted to become great by gaining power over others, just as we often do.

And so the lesson Jesus teaches them, Jesus teaches us. Will we stop being so dense and receive his message and embrace his ways? Will we willingly let Christ disrupt our comfortable lives for the sake of serving the other? Will we be eager to sit at the right and left hand of the Servant of all, wholeheartedly and enthusiastically showing others the good, great, and glorious way of sacrifice and service? Will we heed the voice calling from the whirlwind that wants to spin us around again and again until at last we face and move in the direction of God's choosing?

While we are finite creatures, and cannot really know the infinite Creator's thoughts, though we strive to do so, we see a glimpse of the Divine in Jesus, and even with our limited understanding, we know through Christ what God wants

from us. So let us not be dense disciples, but faithful followers of Christ and fellow servants of all. This is the good, the great, and the glorious way. Amen.