

Why Are We Here?
Mark 10: 35-52

Today marks the second Sunday of Lent, still the early stages of our journey to the cross. Admittedly, Lent has never been a central focus in the life of most Presbyterians. Rather than the more traditional view of Lent as a season of sacrifice, it has instead become a time of introspection, of looking deeply within ourselves so that we can go forward in our faith. Those are difficult tasks when one can take the time to slow down, carefully think and ponder, regroup spiritually. But to do so when the world appears to be crashing down around us at a phenomenal speed is quite the feat. The stark nature of Lent suddenly seems a luxury, one we are not sure we can afford. Yet there is no better time to examine the dark recesses of the soul than when the ugliness of the world is coming to the forefront. Such was the time of Jesus as the Jews were struggling to figure out who they were without a national brand to define them. The leaders of faith, instead of being guides through the confusion, had become embroiled in controversy and increasingly intertwined with and influenced by the Roman politics that ruled their region. The most vulnerable were being pushed further away and forgotten. Now the disciples were confronted almost daily with the dangers of following Jesus as he upset everyone - Romans, faith leaders, family, friends, *everyone*.

Today's portion of the gospel is part of what has become known as the 'hard sayings of Jesus'. These could be said to be the heart of the Lenten journey, for they unsettle us. These are the ones no one really wants to hear, making us squirm in discomfort, reminding us that faith is not a personal reward system, peering into the dark depths of our souls. No feel-good theology in these texts! These stop us in our tracks and make us think in ways we would rather not, calling us to change direction, to become people we never thought we could be, perhaps even people we never wanted to be.

In this tenth chapter, Jesus spoke of the impossibility of the wealthy finding heaven. He said this to a rich young prince, much to the dismay of the well-to-do who controlled the

world. Then he reiterated the impending persecution and death that awaited him in Jerusalem. And as happened with increasing frequency with the disciples, they appeared rather slow to understand what Jesus was saying and what it meant for their living.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'¹

Rather presumptuous of them, wouldn't you say? Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to the disciples' reactions as the 'drum major instinct', the desire to be front and center, to be leading the cause and benefiting from its power. It was almost as if the disciples had *never* heard any of the teachings of Jesus, *never* witnessed any of the miracles, never known him at all. Seats of glory? Then again when people are frightened, their reactions are not always dictated by logic; and it was becoming quite clear that this Messiah was going to turn the world upside down!

As I was reading the news this week, I thought of how the disciples must have felt as their world began to close in on them. As those who did not have much money or social standing, they knew they were at the mercy of the Roman government. They were acutely aware the consequences of disobedience could result in arrest, imprisonment, forced servitude, even death. But the more they learned who Jesus was, the more they listened to him, the more they witnessed his acts and were drawn into *his* life, the more they realized that even their faith as they had perceived it was not the safety net they expected or desired. They, too, were on a Lenten journey that was not one of their own choosing, for it led to places they did not want to go and asked them to be people they could not imagine. So perhaps they were not being obtuse as they jockeyed for position in the heavenly ranks but reacting out of a core of fear as they realized what Jesus was asking of them. Perhaps they thought that, since they were so close to Jesus, they were pre-enrolled in the divine loyalty program and would somehow be immune from the ravages ahead that were becoming increasingly real.

¹ Mark 10: 35-37 NRSV

And Jesus dashed their hopes once more. The other disciples were understandably angry with James and John, and Jesus, not siding with any of them, brought them *all* back to center, to where their faith should have been all along. Not in struggles for positions of power but in others.

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.²

I am not sure if that was a source of soothing to the disciples, for instead of allaying their fears, Jesus just confirmed them.

Our world is far different from the disciples but no less disturbing and frightening. These days it is difficult to know where to turn, which cause to select as one's passion, which issue to address among the many that bombard us incessantly. It's hard to know what to do in a world that is both so damaged and so hurtful, lashing out at everything and everyone in its wake. It does seem as if we are in a small canoe looking up at a looming tsunami wave that threatens to engulf us. How can we possibly stop the onslaught? Yesterday as I was reading the news, I felt that I was being pelted from all angles, and I found myself paralyzed at even being able to put into words all that was being thrown around and my reactions to them. Look, an article about a gun being awarded to the man who championed the overthrow of net neutrality. Over here, one about abuse of young gymnasts. See, another one about the ins and outs of gun control. Wow, in that corner is one with confirmation that Russia did affect the elections. Oh, and I almost missed the one about the Democratic memo being released. And those weren't even major stories. Indictments, accusations, name-calling, threats, bombings, dying, death - it seems that God's beloved community is certainly not of *this* world.

It is no wonder we want to build walls and enact laws to keep people out rather than risk being the welcoming sanctuary we are called to be, that we think the idea of arming

² Mark 10: 42b-45 NRSV

teachers might be a viable option, that we want to divide into righteously indignant camps seeking to prevail rather than do the hard work of healing and loving, that we worship the precarious gods of profit and acquisitions over relationship. We are looking for answers, for certainty, for assurance that all will be well - in the way we want. Lent comes into our lives, pulling us from the house of cards we have built, and calling us to an other-centered faith, one that looks outward, one that challenges the world on all levels, one that strives to create God's beloved community in the dark despair of night. But how do we become community when the world seems hell-bent that the pride of rugged individualism and exceptionalism is more valued than the treasure of relationships, when we are to be grouped with only our own, when reward comes from using one another for pleasure and profit regardless of the price? I don't know what I, or any group of individuals, can do about the long, long list of wrongs and skewed priorities in this world. Sometimes it feels like Don Quixote jousting at windmills. Just as Jesus showed the disciples, Jesus continues to demonstrate to us that this community of which we dream is not only God's promise for us but who we are to be for ourselves, for others, for the world.

As Jesus and the disciples continued the road to Jerusalem, they stopped in Jericho where Jesus once again showed them the nature of faith. A blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, came to him wanting to see again. The healing of the son of Timaeus brought him back into the folds of community where he could find himself once more, where he could discover and cherish the interrelationships that bring life to its fullest. It was in community the son of Timaeus was fully healed found life. It is in community we find life. What we strive to do for one another here - caring, loving, helping one another through life - is what we are to do for others as well. This faith we profess, the faith that is at the core of who we are - it's not about us at all. Community is such a gift, but it was not created to be an exclusive club with seats of reward like the disciples sought. It's not even about our survival. Instead, our identity is grounded in and springs from how we live and who we are for others. Community *always* pushes outward.

Centuries before Jesus the prophet Micah also lived in tumultuous times as the nation of Judah tottered precariously. Internally, it was becoming ripped apart by a growing divide between the rich elite and everyone else. Even their faith was compromised by the growing number of faith leaders who were becoming entwined in the politics of the day. From the outside, the evil empire of Assyria was lurking and ever-present, ready to pounce at any moment. It sounds like a time not so different from that of Jesus and the disciples. Change the names, and it could sound like our own. Even then, there was an answer, one that would become actualized in Jesus of Nazareth, one we can follow today.

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"³ If that is all we ever learn from the Bible, it will be enough, for it defines Jesus, creates community, gives purpose and life. Do justice, the cloud of grace and healing that will envelop and restore the world. Walk humbly - journey day in and day out with all our being in the knowledge that we are not the center of the world. Love kindness. Note the banner says 'mercy'. Both correct, neither encompassing the full depth of the Hebrew world, *hesed*. Attempts to adequately define *hesed* have fallen short for *hesed* is the very nature of God - an all-encompassing grace-full extravagance that always seeks wholeness, healing, restored relationship. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Put them all together, and they find home in Jesus of Nazareth who came to show what God's *hesed* could be as God's beloved community. That is what Jesus said, taught, and lived - though it cost him his life. That is what we are to do as well.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." We, the church, are that small group, and we can change the world. Perhaps it won't be in our lifetime, it most definitely will not be in the form of world domination. In our doubt that it could ever be, we fall back on the words of the prophet, words that were embodied in the life and teachings of

³ Micah 6: 8 NRSV

Jesus. In him, the world was retilted in the direction of justice, grace, relationship. The world as God's beloved community is certain.

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God - faith encapsulated in a single phrase. When that becomes our focus and when we interlace our efforts, we form God's beloved community, one that gives sight and meaning, one that restores wholeness for the world. It is in giving ourselves away that we find ourselves. In seeking justice for others, in loving others with a kindness that comes from the depth of our entire beings, in living humbly in relationship with God and one another, it is then we will truly find life and ourselves as God created us to be. It is all God has ever desired for us. Not only is it the fulcrum of all life, the one by which our decisions and actions are determined, the one that holds who we are in its words, it is the way by which we will be known before God. Now it continues with you and me, holding hands and hearts with one another, inviting others to join the journey. "[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"⁴ Amen.

© Rev. Melodie Long
United Presbyterian Church
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⁴ Micah 6: 8 NRSV