

The Way

sermon digest

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Mark 10:32-45

carolyn dipboye

He speaks as one who knows; and serving as a professor in one of his denomination's top divinity schools, he is certainly in a position to know. "James and John McZebedee matriculated at my seminary again this fall," he begins.

The "Sons of Entitlement," I call them. They are usually -- but not always -- young and white in addition to being male. They have typically grown up in the church, attended Christian colleges and majored in religion. They like to refer to their mental index of Theologians Worth Reading and readily scoff at those theologians they have not read (and so are not worth reading). They patronize second-career students, female students, minority students and those ministerial students who are without apparent academic ambitions. Their fathers are frequently pastors. It is possible, these Sons of Entitlement piously concede in candid moments, that God may be calling them to become professors or bishops. They are rather easy to dislike [Stephen Chapman, *Christian Century*, Oct 17, 2006, p. 20].

They are, Stephan Chapman goes on to say, a delight in the classroom. "Teacher," they say, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you;" and it's less, Chapman observes, a request than a demand cloaked in privilege. They talk a lot, posing questions more to entrap than to learn: "Teacher, since you said X before, how can Y also be true? Are you sure you know what you are talking about? I read a book once that said something else." Recently, Chapman recalls, one of them asked during a final exam for permission to write an essay on a topic of his own choosing rather than on one of the three options provided on the test. When Chapman explained that such latitude would be unfair to everyone else, the student replied softly, "No one else has to know." On another occasion, Chapman recalls, the same student "expressed interest in becoming a bishop. I bet he makes it."

Have you met them? Having hung out in seminary classrooms here and there along the way, I have. I suspect you may have encountered them, too. If not in the seminary, in the university. If not in the university, on the job. If not on the job, in the church, of all places. If not in others, uncomfortably and shamefully in ourselves.

For, you see, they didn't seem to start out that way. These sons of Zebedee, these Sons of Thunder--they were known as brash, yes. They walked away from a good fishing business where they would have done just fine. They became a part of the inner circle: Simon Peter, James and John. Could Jesus have been mistaken about them? Did he take the wrong men into his confidence? Or was something going on here that should cause us to raise our antennas? So that rather than casting ourselves in the role of the mature and reliable disciple we think ourselves to be, we look within ourselves and around us at the church that confidently paints itself a follower of Jesus' way.

The way of Jesus is the way of service, not privilege. They were, Mark says, "going up to Jerusalem;" and they were, he also points out, "afraid." And rightfully so. For the third time Jesus tells them he is going to die. Only this time as the city looms on the horizon, he speaks in more detail. "The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." No longer in the hopefully distant future, the crisis is upon them.

The sensitive Sons of Thunder step forward: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." It's almost as if Mark goes out of his way to shock us into the reality of the situation. This inner circle, these men who had walked so closely with Jesus and who, more than anyone, should have been prepared to be present to him in this weighty moment, seem to be totally oblivious to his pain. Fred Craddock calls them "the Not-Yet-Ready Disciples." We chuckle and cluck our tongues. Certainly we would have done better than they--well, maybe.

Three times, Mark says, Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for his coming death. And three times, the disciples simply don't get it. On the first occasion, Peter chides Jesus and seeks to turn him aside from his journey. On the second two occasions, the disciples degenerate into infighting over anticipated positions of greatness and power. On this third occasion, when the disciples learn of the brothers' request, they begin, Mark says, "to be angry." One could hope it was because they were

infuriated at the insensitivity of James' and John's self-serving behavior at the moment Jesus most needed them and they most needed each other. More than likely, however, given Mark's depictions of the group's other rumblings and grumblings, their motivation was not so noble.

Three times Jesus instructs the disciples of his approaching death. Three times they degenerate into their child's game of king of the mountain. Three times Jesus speaks to them about the ongoing task to which he has called them. Three times he says it is about giving their lives rather than clutching their lives safely and selfishly to themselves. It is not, Jesus assures them and us, about competitively elbowing our way to the top; it is about service.

Before we get too censorious toward those early disciples, we should be more honest with and about ourselves. Visions of grandeur do not just dance in the heads of those unlearned, first century fishermen. They dance in ours as well. Pastor Martin Copenhaver ruefully recalls a complaint registered by a deacon in a former church. While the church bylaws designated deacons as the spiritual leaders of the congregation, the man had found himself as a deacon so occupied with mundane tasks like delivering food to the homeless shelter and washing dishes, he had no time left for the really important spiritual matters. "I feel," the man complained, "like a glorified butler." Delighted to have the opening, the pastor proceeded to turn to the book of Acts where deacons were first commissioned for, of all things, the purpose of distributing food to the widows! Deacons, he pointed out, "were indeed butlers, charged with the mundane task of delivering food, and also glorified because that simple act was an important expression of Christ's self-giving love" [*Christian Century*, Oct 5, 1994, p. 893].

Everything in the way of Jesus, Copenhaver goes on to say, "is turned upside down, and many of our usual assumptions begin to shake loose. To lead is to be a servant. The place of greatest honor is not at the head table but in the kitchen. The greatest reward is not a gold watch but a dish towel."

The way of Jesus passes through the realities of the world in which we live, not around them. "Grant us," the brothers pled, "the best seats in the house—one of us to sit at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." "Are you able," Jesus asked, "to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" "We are," they enthusiastically responded. "We are!" Perhaps it is out of kindness that Jesus waited until later (14:26) to tell them how far they were from being ready—how in just a matter of days they would all scatter and fail him miserably. The path ahead would pass through the Garden of Gethsemane, the courtyard of the high priest and Golgotha. Perhaps, just perhaps, if the brothers had known that those who would end up on Jesus' right and Jesus' left would be the two men hanging beside him on crosses, they would have tempered their enthusiasm.

That, however, is the character of Jesus' way. It is not about privilege and it is not about a cozy, isolated, merely spiritual retreat. For us, as for those first disciples, it is about the realities and challenges of the world through which we walk. The road to Jerusalem and this Lenten season does not call us out of the world but into the world as sensitive, informed, faithful servants of the one we would follow. Ann Weems reflects on the circuitous and often mundane and frustrating path we must go:

The way to Jerusalem looks suspiciously like other roads,
and the pilgrims look suspiciously like you and me.
I expected the road to Jerusalem to be crowded with holy people—
clerics and saints . . . people who have kindness wrinkled in their
faces and comfort lingering in their voices,
But this is more like rush hour . . . horns blowing, people pushing,
voices cursing. . . . This is not what I envisioned!

O God, I've only begun and already I feel I've lost my way.
Surely this is not the road and surely these are not the ones
to travel with me.
This Lenten journey calls for holy retreat, for reflection
and repentance.

Instead of holiness the highway is crammed
with the cacophony of chaos.

Is there no back road to Jerusalem?

No quiet path where angels tend to weary travelers?

No sanctuary from the noise of the world?

Just this? Can this hectic highway be the way you would have us go? Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, 27.

Is there no back road to Jerusalem? No more quiet, peaceful, reflective path we might follow to get there: The way of Jesus led through Gethsemane, trial and crucifixion; and the way of Jesus for us leads through the crucible of human pain and suffering today. It is not the path of privilege or escape. It is the way of responsible caring. It is the path along which we must wrestle with issues of honesty and fairness in our workplaces. It is the path along which we build compassionate and healthy family relationships. It is the path that does not shirk issues in our community, nation and world but applies itself to every deepening understanding and concerted efforts at bringing resolution to conflicts and injustices that sap the life's blood from people whose names we may never know. And yes, it takes action like that mentioned this morning in the "As you go" paragraphs. It leads us to stand "shoulder-to-shoulder" with people of other faiths to speak in support of Muslim neighbors maligned for their faith.

The way of Jesus is not the easy way, the necessarily popular way, or the politically correct way. But it is his way, and I will seek my life long to make it my way. How about you?