

SHOES OFF

Have you ever played a game of “truth or dare” with a child? When I was little it was always the game that I dreaded because it asked you to make a decision *before* you had all the information. Will you tell a truth, usually a secret or something embarrassing, like do you have a crush on someone in your class or did you ever eat play-dough? Or will you take a dare to do something silly or stupid or...mean? Will you pinch someone or ignore someone or change who your best friend is? What someone might ask you held great power over my imagination: my answer would reveal if I was “in” or “out,” if I was wise or if I was foolish. In our Scripture passage today, the disciples attempt to play truth or dare with Jesus.

The context for this passage is important. In the beginning of Mark chapter 10, Jesus is saying things like “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” and “ go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven,” and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” These are some of the most well-known verses from the gospels, and some of the passages that most acutely point to what kind of kingdom Jesus was working to bring about. And they come right before our Scripture for today. In verse 31, Jesus says, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” speaking of a cosmic reversal in the way humans order our society.

And then: “Hey, Jesus, we want you to do anything we ask.”

Jesus, being the nice guy that he is (and probably having their number and suspecting what was coming), says, “Ok, James and John, what do you want?”

And they sure do get themselves in hot water, as they ask for honor and prestige when Jesus “enters his glory,” when his time for ruling comes. They think

they are asking a simple question. Perhaps, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, they hope to trap Jesus in a quick answer to a foolish question. However, Jesus’ answer offers a lot more than they bargained for.

James and John were sons of Zebedee, you know, these are the guys who were called away from their fishing boats when Jesus said, “Come, follow me!” They are among the first disciples Jesus called, and they left their family and their livelihood and their community to follow this itinerant rabbi from the backwater of Judea. These are the guys who traveled with Jesus, listening to him teach and preach, witnessing Jesus’ miracles (and in the gospel of Mark we get A LOT of miracle stories), eating and drinking and baptizing right alongside Jesus.

And yet, the disciples are often seen as silly or confused or just plain missing the point. As a child in Sunday school, I remember thinking (and sometimes saying aloud) “Silly disciples!” as we read yet another story of how Jesus shared a story or a prophecy and the disciples consequently did the thing that Jesus just told them not to do. It’s like when a cat gets onto the mantle: “no, don’t push that photo off the mantle, it’ll break, no, don’t do that, get down from there, no, be careful!” and then the cat nudges your family photo off the ledge. As it smashes, the cat surely looks you right in the eye as if to say, “What? Was I not supposed to do that?” The disciples are the cat in this story. Some scholars think that it must have been embarrassing for the disciples to be so confused all the time, so much so that the author of the gospel of Matthew had the *mother* of James and John ask for her sons to be glorified along with Jesus...yeah, play up the “pushy mother” trope, why don’t ya? Or the author of Luke’s gospel called this discussion a “simple dispute,” and glossed over it all together!

It’s easy to be frustrated with James and John, because if anyone should understand what Jesus is about, what Jesus is trying to achieve in his ministry, they should be the ones to get it. James even accompanied Jesus to the top of the

mountain when he was transfigured! And it doesn't get much more plain than that that something cosmic is going on with this dude.

But in a way, the disciples and their questions are not silly. Did not Jesus speak in riddles and parables and rather abstractly? He wasn't exactly plain-spoken! Reading the gospel stories about all of the times the disciples misunderstand Jesus, I want to tell them that it's ok to be confused--sometimes I am confused too! But other times, I get almost angry with the disciples...I want to shake them and say with exasperation, why are you asking these foolish questions? Don't you get the message here? Are you willfully ignoring what Jesus is telling you? Are you purposefully asking for power and privilege when this rabbi preaches just the opposite?

Verse 32 of Mark chapter 10 says the disciples were amazed at Jesus' stories as they followed him to Jerusalem, but the others who followed him were afraid.

What do we think of that? Do we join the disciples in amazement or the crowds of followers, in fear? Because though we might immediately say, “no, I'm not scared, I am amazed!” it is important to recognize that the gospel according to Jesus, the “good news” that he was delivering throughout his life and in his teachings, is scary. It's intimidating. It's dangerous. For people then and for people now, the gospel was one of sacrificing their power and privilege for the sake of the kingdom of God. The gospel was in direct opposition to the Roman Empire, and really to *any* empire, which some scholars call the domination system: “which is characterized by power exercised over others, by control of others, by ranking as the primary principle of social organization, by hierarchies of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed.”¹ That gospel shook people, and is still shaking people today.

¹ Charles Campbell, Feasting on the Word, Year B Proper 24.

And so, in spite of that shaking, that world-reversing, upside-down-turning gospel preaching Jesus was doing, his disciples still come to him yearning for power. Having just heard “the first will be last and the last will be first,” James and John ironically position themselves with those who the world puts first, those seated in the most important spots at the banquet, those whose bank accounts are most robust, those who sit on councils and make decisions and produce governance plans. James and John, seeking to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands when he comes into his glory, do not understand the prophecies Jesus has been telling them about his own death; in their questioning, these sons of Zebedee position themselves with the very rulers who will be the ones to kill Jesus.

The author of the gospel of Mark really liked irony. If you look closely at this gospel which is the earliest gospel written, Mark is constantly playing with people’s expectations and giving the narrative ironic twist. Like Emily Dickinson’s famous poem, Mark is telling the truth, but telling it slant, playing up certain parts for dramatic effect when they are not quite what they seem. And what could be more dramatic than a mysterious person called “the Son of Man” predicting their own gruesome death at the hands of the state on three separate occasions, while their followers are so confused that they actually wind up aligning with the power of the empire that the Human One came to topple? What could be more ironic than the seemingly-silly questions the disciples ask having profound answers with deep implications for discipleship? What could be more ironic than two former-fishermen imploring their rabbi to allow them to be seated at his right and left hand when he is glorified, when soon there will be criminals hung on his right and left when he dies by capitol punishment on a cross?

I wonder why James and John asked to receive positions of glory. Was it out of lust for status? Was it a misunderstanding of Jesus’ core teachings about the reversal of power? Or were they afraid that they actually *did* understand Jesus’

predictions and they were in denial? Were they asking over and over hoping that they would get a different answer, praying that the truth of what Jesus predicted wasn't real?

Maybe the disciples do get a bad reputation for their seemingly foolish questions. Maybe their questions aren't foolish at all. Maybe the gospel writer is using James and John's question to show how deep earthly power gets. David B. Howell, in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary, reminds us that “we want a lot of things that we never admit out loud.” Our Scripture today is one place where the desire for privilege and status and wealth and security are shared openly.

Though James and John had traveled with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry, it took time for them to adjust their thinking to the different world order Jesus was heralding. Jake Owensby writes, “God's realm is an upside down kind of glory.” The orders of status and privilege in human empires do not have the same sway in God's kingdom. Even though the disciples had left home, family, livelihood, even though they had given up so much, their thinking showed they still clung to the hierarchical order of worldly empires. Anyone who has begun their own journey of acknowledging and undoing the various privileges we carry can attest that training your thinking takes time. It is a process that necessitates going through your thoughts with a fine-toothed comb, seeking out all the ways which our patterns of living uphold systems of oppression. Questions must be asked, serious and silly and honest and heartbreaking questions. And sometimes we feel foolish when going about training ourselves to think differently. But this passage shows us that the disciples are right there with us. When Jesus said the disciples must become servants in order to lead, imagine what confusion ensued! Imagine what reluctance this message would have been met with!

James J. Thompson advises in *Feasting on the Word*:

“We frequently confuse the purposes and goal of our cause with our hope for personal success. Subsequently, even our best thoughts and actions tend to be tainted with vanity and ambition...The appropriate response to our incurable tendency to put ourselves first is to be cautious and self-reflective about our motives...the proper response to human frailty is not to give up on the notion of leadership or action; it is to set up checks and balances within a community or organization. We must keep each other honest. We must be a community of accountability.”

And so the disciples’ foolish questions reveal a lesson about servanthood and humility as a perfect foil for the powerful. Frederick Buechner defines humility this way:

“Humility is often confused with the polite self-deprecation of saying you’re not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship. If you really *aren’t* much of a bridge player, you’re apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy. True humility doesn’t consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.”²

If the disciples heard Buechner’s definition of humility, what do you think would happen? I have a sneaky feeling that James and John would feel kinda sheepish when they looked at how they asked Jesus for prestigious positions. And perhaps the other disciples, who were mad at James and John for asking, would consider whether they were jealous of the disciples’ question or whether their anger was righteous towards those who misunderstood Jesus’ mission. And so the disciples’ bold assertion that indeed, they are able to drink the same cup and share in Jesus’ baptism, is a misunderstanding of Jesus or wishful thinking, but it certainly is not humble discipleship. Jesus was not looking for disciples who had

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 47-48.

the ability to share in all aspects of his ministry, he was looking for disciples who had the availability to be open to the emergence of God’s kingdom.

But these values, too, can be misconstrued and become dangerous tools. Dolores Williams and Renita Weems and Emilie Townes and many other womanist theologians, Biblical scholars and ethicists have referred to the explicit use of servanthood ideology to keep people of color, and specifically women of color, in positions of subservience. “Self-sacrifice...does not mean self-mutilation or self-extinction; we are not called to disappear.”³ Humility, when forced, is also a weapon. And it ceases to be humility, but instead becomes oppression.

Jesus finishes our Scripture passage in truly Jesus-style: He describes more specifically the ways that the alternative community of discipleship and servant leadership differs from the Roman empire’s mode of ruling. He tells the disciples,

“You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”

Jesus makes a promise to the disciples. He is not only showing them how his mission and their work in the world oppose the power structures of the empire, what some call the “domination system.” He also promises radical change to the powers that be...not only will they be flipped from servant to leader, but they will be entirely separate from any hierarchy empire would recognize, and I love that the Common English Bible uses this word, for the cause of the “liberation” of many.

Noted preacher and homiletician Charles Campbell writes that Jesus’ promise in these last three verses serves to assuage the disciples’ fears. Their question to Jesus, their desire for power and security are the results of their

³ James Thompson, Feasting on the Word Year B Proper 24.

fear...the world was changing, their leader was saying confusing and troubling things, they had set about the hopelessly human task of training themselves to think differently. The “Big C Church”--and our church--can relate to some of these fears. Many in mainline churches are worried about the church’s future, are worried about changing worship styles or religious community that happens outside of the church walls. And so we would rather secure ourselves and our status rather than risking the way of the cross by training ourselves to think differently and move in the world differently. That’s amazing...and scary.

Campbell writes,

“Sometimes these words [the cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (v. 39)] are read as a threat or warning from Jesus: “James and John, you too will be crucified.” However in the larger context of the story, Jesus’ words may also be read as an extraordinary promise: “You will not always be driven by your fears and your need for security. Rather, you will be empowered to take up your cross and follow me. You will be faithful disciples even to the end.” Here is the great promise for the church. We need not always live in fear; we need not continually seek our own security [and relevance]. Rather, we have Jesus’ promise that we can and will live as faithful disciples as we seek to follow him. It is an extraordinary promise made to such a fumbling, stumbling group of disciples--then and now!”

As we sang earlier, Jesus calls to us,

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
for I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand."

And so, stumbling as we may be and asking foolish and not-so-foolish questions, the church today--that is, WE--have a choice to make. Will we fear the new, fear irrelevance, fear change, fear fading from importance, fear letting go of our own power and privilege and let ourselves play into the Domination System of the empire? Or will we join Jesus as he calls us to put aside our quest for greatness

at others’ expense, put aside our anxieties over our own importance, and follow the way of humble discipleship?

Indeed, friends, hear this good news today, we are called to serve one another, we are called to be light for the world, we are called to let each other be our servants and be Christ to each other. As we continue on our journeys and pilgrimages, wherever we are bound, let us have the grace to ask good questions, grace to risk receiving true answers, grace to embrace our foolishness, face our fears and accept our humanity. May it ever be so. Amen.