

A Different Kind of King

Mark 10:32-45

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/sermon11-25-2018.mp3>



When you look at your bulletin, or the screen, or perhaps your handy-dandy pocket liturgical calendar, you'll see that today is called "Christ the King" Sunday. We'll talk a little more about how this Feast Day came to be a part of our Christian year later on, but for now, I wonder what *you* think when we say that Christ is the 'King'. As welcome New Members into our congregation, please give some thought to how it was that *you* entered into the path of following Jesus? Who told you about the Lord? What did they say?

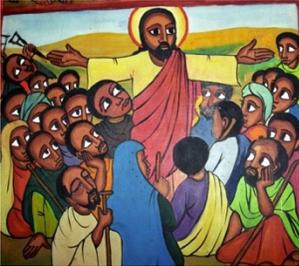


As I mentioned a few weeks ago, there are some who invite others to consider an eternal relationship with their creator using what could be called the "turn or burn, baby" method. Listeners are urged to clean up their acts and to become holier people – leave sin behind, straighten up and fly right, and become the kind of people that God can like a little better. Some folk see the Gospel as a call to repentance, which can often mean giving up sin and becoming a little nicer.



Another, more attractive approach to teaching others the good news could be referred to as "Jesus is the answer". There was a time in my own life where I encouraged people to turn to Jesus at a point when they were simply tired of all of the problems in their lives. Their marriages were

miserable, or they didn't have any focus, or there was financial difficulty. Whatever the problem was, Jesus had come to make it better. An evangelist who subscribes to this school of thought might say that you should become a Christian because it will help you get rid of, or at least deal with, your problems better.



I am not here to rain on anyone's parade, and truth be told, I've lived in both of these Gospel camps before. But I don't stay in either of them very often now. The way of discipleship, at least as it is described in the Gospel of Mark, has little connection with either the "turn or burn" crowd or the "Jesus is the answer" folks. Today, we join up with Jesus and his disciples as they are on the way to Jerusalem. Most faithful Jewish men in that day and age tried to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal. No doubt, that's what the twelve disciples thought was going on, in spite of Jesus' attempts to speak of it in other terms.

This passage from Mark 10 contains the third of Jesus' predictions about his own suffering and death. In Mark 8, right after Peter's confession that Jesus is in fact the Holy One sent by God, Jesus reveals to his most faithful followers that he will suffer and die. Then in Mark 9, as the group is still basking in the glow of the Transfiguration and the healing of a boy who suffered from seizures, Jesus calls them out of that into a consideration of his impending struggle. In each of these prior circumstances, the disciples don't have a clue. They just can't figure out what Jesus is talking about – how can he be the Messiah and die? That's just crazy talk.

He's back at it today – he's just laid two heavy teachings on them – one about marriage and divorce and sexual ethics and the other about money. And then he says pretty explicitly

that when they get to Jerusalem, he will be forced to go through a sham trial, he'll be beaten and killed, and he'll rise on the third day. In spite of the apparently obvious nature of this prediction, James and John start to daydream about how good it's going to be when Jesus finally starts acting like a king. Despite the fact that whenever Jesus has brought this up, he's had to quell any talk about how great that's going to be, James and John get so wound up in their discussion that it actually seems like a good idea to them to call "dibs" on the best seats in Jesus' kingdom.

These guys don't get it. We know that because Jesus looks at them and says, "You fellas just don't get it, do you?" But then look at what happens next. He doesn't yell at them. He doesn't scold them. He simply reminds them that they don't know what the kingdom will be like. They can't imagine the crown he'll be wearing – a crown made of thorns, crushed into his skull. They haven't the foggiest notion about what is waiting for Jesus on the hill known as Calvary, where he would be nailed to a tree and hung out to die. And then, gently, he says, "You don't understand anything at all about the cup that I will drink, but you will – because you will share that cup."

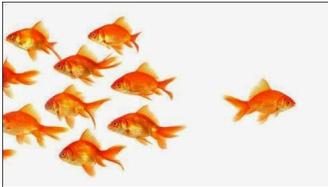
And it's not just James and John who don't get it. When the ten other disciples hear that James and John are trying to claim the best spots at the messianic inauguration, they are upset! I suppose you could make the claim that these guys were really looking out for Jesus here and were indignant by the petty request made by their friends...but I think that Mark's pretty clear that they were irritated because if Jesus *did* end up giving James & John the two best seats in the house, where were the rest of them supposed to sit?

And again, Jesus sits them down and invites them to a time of teaching wherein he is gentle and patient. He's not

belittling them, he's not berating them, and he's not telling them to straighten up and fly right. Instead, he's trying to help them re-shape their expectations. He's hanging in there with them.

Why? Why is he responding like this?

Well, let's be honest. This isn't the first time that the twelve disciples appear to be slow, dimwitted, selfish, ambitious, and thick-headed. But here they are, following Jesus. They may not grasp all of the details concerning this coming kingdom. But they are following Jesus. They are not following Jesus because they want his help in getting rid of a few bad habits, and they are not following him because it's easier than whatever it was that they used to do before they started following him. But they **are** following Jesus.



And listen to this: if the first readers of Mark's gospel knew anything about following Jesus, it was this: following Jesus can really screw up your life. After all, remember what we said about this little book when we started this exploration: Mark is written by a man who is jail, on death row, for preaching about Jesus. The early followers of Jesus who lived in Rome were used as human torches at Nero's garden parties. So far as we can tell none of the twelve disciples, with the possible exception of John, died of natural causes. And those first Christians who were not killed were treated as outcasts – they were told over and over again that they did not belong with the Jewish believers, and the Gentiles thought they were crazy – they called them cannibals and incestuous. If there is one thing that the readers of Mark's Gospel knew, it was that following Jesus will screw with your head and could really mess up your life.

Twenty-five years ago, I took a group of young people

on a mission trip to Mexico. Two weeks after that trip, I left that church and moved to Pittsburgh. About five months later, I got a really thick envelope from one of the kids. I tore open the envelope, expecting to hear sunny news about her life. Instead, I read,

Dear Dave, I just wanted to thank you for totally ruining my senior year of High School. My whole life, I've looked forward to this year, where we'd be on top. My friends and I had all kinds of plans for how we were going to rule the school, and for Prom and Homecoming and parties. But the trip to Mexico changed all that. My friends are materialistic and selfish and thoughtless – they can't get their heads out of their butts to save their lives. The things that they want are so small...of course, all of that was true last year, too – *only I didn't know that last year*. The trip to Mexico really opened my eyes, and showed me that I am materialistic and selfish and thoughtless – and I hate that about myself. Why can't I be lazy and happy like my friends? But no, I have to care now. I have to think about other people. That mission trip really screwed up everything about my senior year....

Do you see? She got it! Yay! She had been *going to* church all her life...but here she was thinking about *following* Jesus! The good thing is that the letter was ten pages long, and by about page eight or nine, she had gotten past some of the anger and had decided that if she had to choose between being selfish and materialistic and following Jesus, she'd rather be with Jesus...but it was a struggle. Because when she took Jesus seriously, she didn't fit into any of the really comfortable slots in her high school.

Beloved, if you are here expecting me to scold you into the Kingdom of God, it's not going to happen. I don't think

that the reason that Jesus came was so that you wouldn't drink quite as much, or so you would think about sex a little less often, or write to your grandmother more. If you need to hear someone say that it's time to turn or burn, baby, well, I don't think I'm your guy.

And if you are here because your life is miserable and you think that somehow I can help lobby Jesus onto your side so that you have fewer problems – if you think that if you are able to get yourself cleaned up a little bit then Jesus will reward you with a new car, a better boyfriend, or whiter teeth, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you.



¹Because as far as I can see, Jesus is not primarily interested in having a group of followers who are holier than everyone else, if by holy we mean people who smoke less, or cuss less, or fornicate less than the general population. Jesus didn't come to make us nicer.

And as far as I can see, Jesus is not primarily interested in having a group of followers who are richer, or better employed, or have fresher breath or fewer neuroses than the general population. He didn't come to make us more socially acceptable.

Jesus came to be the ransom. To give his life so that we might have real life. Jesus came to be God for humanity and to be humanity for God. And as he marches toward his death in Jerusalem, he is imploring the twelve to stick with him. He's not promising them anything, and he's not threatening them. He's asking them to stay the course because that is the only way that they will be able to become the community that he is calling them to be. For a couple of years, he has taught them "the Kingdom of God is at hand". Now he is

¹ *Some People Following Jesus*, Gary Bunt, Contemporary British Artist

equipping them to *be the kingdom!* To enflesh that Kingdom in the world! To be the sign of God's presence in and through creation.

I hope that each of our new members will recall that in the Presbyterian Church we are governed by both the Bible and a document called *The Book of Order*. In the very beginning of that book, it says that the church exists in order to be "the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world." (F-1.0304)

I love that! It tells the truth that the only way that your neighbors or mine will know of the grace, truth, forgiveness, service, and sacrificial love of the Savior is if somehow the body of Christ – that's us – is able to exhibit that grace, truth, forgiveness, service, and sacrificial love.

When the twelve don't get it – here in Mark chapter ten, or for their whole lives – Jesus doesn't call them morons and tell them to get lost. No, he calls them together and invites them to try again and to lean on each other and to stick together – because the only way that they'll be able to make it in the world is if they do stick together.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will do something incredibly difficult. It will take everything he has. And he is asking his followers to stay with him when it happens. And to take over for him when he leaves.

Discipleship is hard work, my friends. It would be easy if all we had to do was lie a little less often or budget our money a little better. But it's all of who we are. Discipleship is not a part-time job. The only way for me to give all of who I am is if I can count on you to help me where I am coming up short. I can be forgiving if you forgive me. I can be gracious if you show me grace. I can love unconditionally if you do that for

me. I can give my life away...if you come, too.

I mentioned that today is “Christ the King” Sunday. Most of the great “feast days” of the church are hundreds, if not thousands of years old. The church has observed Advent and Lent and Easter and Christmas for millennia. However, it wasn’t until 1925 that “Christ the King” was added to the church calendar. This observance came about because in the aftermath of World War I, much of the world’s population lived in places where tyrants and dictators were gaining strength. These rulers insisted that Christians ought to somehow compartmentalize their faith, and see “religion” as a nice little hobby, but to give their highest allegiance to the government and the flag of one particular nation. The church said, “No, it is Christ, not any human or any nation, who is worthy of our ultimate loyalty.”

Beloved, we are called to be committed. We are called to live the Christian ideal – that of following Christ. Obviously, Jesus is concerned with your personal life and your habits. Obviously, Jesus is concerned with the choices you make. But these things are not a precondition to becoming disciples – those things are matters for discussion once you are on the road. Let us join each other in this holy, wholly difficult task of following the Master as we love and serve those among whom he has placed us. Thanks be to God! Amen.