

Do Me a Favor?

Mark 10:32-45

October 17, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

I may have already told you this, but I am extremely reluctant to make promises unless I am certain I can keep them. Our kids will verify this. When one of them has a checkup at the doctor, and they ask "Will I have to get a shot?" I say something like "I don't think so." "Do you promise?" "No, I can't promise, because I'm not certain, and I don't want to make a promise I'm not sure about." Then they pepper me with questions about shots up until we are actually leaving the doctor's office. Sure, it would be easier in the moment to just promise that they won't get a shot, but I want my promise to mean something, especially to the kids. So now, when I say "If something feels weird when you're spending the night with your friend and you want to come home, just call me. Even in the middle of the night. I'll come get you. I promise." They know I mean it, and that's worth all the pestering questions about shots every single year.

I wish I were as good at handling this next phrase: "Would you do me a favor?" The kids don't ask me that, but plenty of other people do. If I'm not paying attention, I'll say yes to that question without stopping to think about it. And then I feel like I'm committed, even if it's a big favor that I don't feel like I really can do, or do well.

This question: "Would you do us a favor?" is essentially what James and John ask Jesus. Let's back up a paragraph first, though. Jesus has just told them, at the end of our reading last week, that the last will be first and the first will be last. That's the third time he's told them that already. Then he tells them, again for the third time, that they are going to Jerusalem, and he will be arrested and killed. It doesn't seem unclear, or like Jesus is somehow joking, as if being crucified is something anyone would joke about.

The very next verse, immediately after that, James and John say, "Hey, Jesus, can you do us a favor?" And Jesus, obviously much wiser than I replies not "Yes, of course," but rather "What's the favor?" I don't know what to make of James and John here. Are they really and truly oblivious to the coming troubles that Jesus is clearly warning them of? Do they still not understand he's not going to be the kind of Messiah they were hoping for? Have they not heard a word he has been saying, not observed his actions, not listened to a thing? Are they just too overwhelmed by the thought of Jesus dying violently and themselves being called to follow in his footsteps, that they pretend they haven't understood and change the subject real quick? The only thing in their favor is that after each of the previous two times Jesus has tried to tell them that he is headed toward persecution, at least one of the disciples has said something just as ridiculous as James and John are about to, they've showed that they are just as insensitive or clueless or willfully ignorant.

Because the favor that James and John ask for is this: When you are in your glory, would you do us the favor of having one of us sit at your left and one at your right. Yep, that was their first thought after Jesus has *just told them* that the last will be first and the first will be last, that they are getting ever closer to Jerusalem, where he will be killed. They think about themselves, right away and strongly enough that they approach Jesus to ask this favor.

Though it's not entirely clear what they are imagining this throne of glory might be, it's clear that they want the seats of honor. I always picture the State of the Union address, where just behind the President sit the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader. Those are the seats of honor. Or at a banquet of some sort, or a wedding reception, where there is a head table, and the most honored guests are at the middle of that table, the next most honored guests are next to them, and so on. James and John want to be the most important. There's really no other way to interpret their request.

And if that's their request, they've completely missed the point. Again. Jesus is exceedingly

patient with them and the rest of the disciples. The other disciples are angry at James and John, apparently not because they've acted silly, but because they want the seats of honor—the seats that the other disciples thought were surely theirs. All of them have missed the point entirely. Jesus attempts to tell them one more time what he means. What does it mean to be a Jesus follower, what are the implications, what will be the consequences.

He starts by what they have observed themselves, about the Gentiles: those whom they recognize as their rulers—notice he isn't saying they are real rulers, just recognized as rulers—"lord" it over them and are tyrants. The disciples know this; they've seen the Roman Empire in action.

And then Jesus says, "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

James and John have missed the point entirely. It's easy to do. We miss the point, too. Yes, their request to sit at Jesus' right and left hand was silly and completely missed what Jesus has been telling them for ten chapters. I think their crucial mistake is not just saying something silly, nor in missing the point.

I think their crucial mistake is that they are focused on themselves, rather than on those whom they are to serve. You can't be a servant of all if you're focused on yourself. James and John are concerned not about what is going to happen to Jesus, nor what is going to happen to their fellow disciples, nor what will become of all of the people following Jesus. They're concerned about themselves, and making sure they're recognized for being important.

Jesus has been saying, and says again, that's not how things work in the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, we serve others not ourselves. And therefore our focus has to be on others, not ourselves. It's really quite straightforward, and also really quite difficult. Jesus's words to James and John and the rest are directly applicable to us.

Someone gave me a book this week that has, on the surface, nothing to do with church. So far, it's sort of a memoir about hiking in national parks and communing with nature. But this quote jumped out at me right in the introduction: "It was just one in a lifelong string of reminders that the more I focused my attention on myself, the stupider I behaved; and the more I focused on others, the likelier I was to be of actual service, because I could then apprehend the work that needed doing."

Focusing on others, to see and understand the work that needs doing, and thereby be of actual service to others. Right in line with what Jesus was telling the disciples. I'm glad to know that others need reminding of this with the same frequency as I do. Focus on others, so that we can be of actual service.