

A sermon preached on October 17th, 2021 based upon Mark 10:32-47 entitled, "Mixed Motives and Jesus' Transformative Love."

Once again, we find Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. He's been on this journey since two chapters earlier when he first told his disciples that he had to go there to suffer, die and rise on the third day. The way Mark tells the story, he makes it clear that even as the disciples believe Jesus is the messiah they can't understand the path he is taking. Jesus tells them three separate times of his plan to lay his life down, and each time Mark immediately tells us about something the disciples did or said that shows they're just not getting it. For instance, after the second time Mark immediately tells us that the disciples got into an argument among themselves about which of them was the "greatest" – the most worthy – the highest on the status ladder. In response to this argument Jesus shows them a small child, telling them that if they want to be "great" they should aspire to take the place of the child – that is, at the bottom rung of the status ladder. They should be the servant of all. In spite of hearing Jesus tell them this, soon thereafter we hear how parents were bringing their little children to Jesus that he might bless them, but the disciples try to keep them away because seeing the children with the eyes of the world they assume these inconsequential children aren't important enough to take up the messiah's time.

Immediately before what we are about to hear Jesus tells his disciples for the third time that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and rise again, but the disciples are filled with anxiety and are afraid to ask him about it. The journey to Jerusalem is almost done. The brother James and John approach Jesus with a special request that shows yet again that they just don't understand what I call the "Jesus walk."

Listen now as I read the story, listening for the word of the Lord.

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." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

In speaking of his cup and baptism, Jesus is referring to his willingness to suffer and die in an outpouring of God's great love.

They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and

with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "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."

Jesus knows the disciples vastly better than the disciples know themselves. When he asks them whether they are able to drink his cup, and undergo his baptism, they confidently say, "we are able." This is how they want to view themselves: brave and loyal. But Jesus knows exactly what will happen in when all hell breaks loose in Jerusalem. He knows that when he is arrested, the fear inside the disciples will rise up within them, and they will run for cover to save their skins. They are not as brave or as loyal as they want to think they are.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves as well.

We like to think we know why we do the things we do, but more often than not we don't, at least not fully. I heard of this psychological study in which an experimenter stood on a busy street asking people passing by if they would be willing to take part in a study. Those who were willing were shown pictures of random people with neutral expressions on their faces and asked whether they had a positive or negative reaction to the person in the picture.

A little slight of hand took place that proved to influence the response of those who participated. The experimenter was holding a cup, and when a person agreed to participate the experimenter asked him or her to hold the cup while she got her file of pictures. Sometimes the cup was hot and sometimes it was cold. People who looked at the pictures were much more likely to have a positive reaction to the person pictured if the cup they got to hold was hot, and far more likely to have a negative reaction if the cup they held was cold.

And they were utterly unaware that this had influenced their perceptions.

Why do we do the good things we do – the acts of kindness we practice in this world? Hopefully we do them out of some authentic compassion on our part, but more often than not our motivations are mixed. There is a desire to be perceived as a "good, kind person". We divide the world into good people and bad people, and we want to be identified as one of the good people, and with it to claim the privilege of looking down on the "bad" people.

Jesus called for this kind of self-reflection when in the Sermon on the Mount he talked about people doing acts of charity or, for that matter praying in public so others can see them and admire them for their charity and piety.

With some self-reflection, we recognize that rarely are our motivations what we would call “pure.”

Why is it important to be aware of this? It’s important because a great deal of the evil in this world is committed by people who don’t acknowledge that their motives are mixed and claim moral purity. In the great division between people on the left and right in this country, evil is committed by those of us who convince ourselves that our beliefs are absolutely true and good and that people on the other side are absolutely wrong and evil.

The reaction of the other ten disciples to James and John is striking. They are indignant when they discover that they are asking for the highest seats in Jesus’ kingdom. Perhaps their indignation arises in part because James and John have put into words what they were hoping for themselves. Assuming this is the case, in some sense James and John deserve some credit in being more transparent about their motivations. They all want personal glory -- at least James and John admit it.

Given the way Mark tells the story – Jesus heading to lay down his life in utter humility while the disciples are looking for personal glory – their motivations so obviously out of line with what is motivating Jesus -- there is something remarkably gracious about the fact that Jesus doesn’t say to them, *“Get out of here! You’re obviously in this for the wrong reasons!”* No, he seems to take them where they are – loving them in their mixed emotions.

It’s striking the words of Jesus to James and John: “You **will** drink my cup; you **will** undergo my baptism...” In light of the fact that when the going gets rough in Jerusalem and they will quite clearly not drink the cup or undergo the baptism, what does this mean?

It means that Jesus can see further down the road – beyond the crucifixion and the resurrection. He sees what James and John will become.

Jesus knows John and James better than they know themselves, and even as he sees what they don’t want to see about themselves, he sees something else as well, something deeper that they are not yet capable of acknowledging -- something precious and good, something brave -- a profound capacity for sacrificial love.

At this point this capacity in its fullness is buried like a seed – one of Jesus’ favorite images -- in the depths of their soul. It’s buried out of sight, but it’s there nonetheless.

He sees us each the same way.

Entering the ordained ministry is only one way to follow Jesus. In truth the call and claim of Jesus is on all of us equally, it makes no difference whether one is clergy or lay. The expression, “full time ministry” is deeply misleading. You, too are called to full-time ministry. Where ever your life is lived – that is the setting of your full-time ministry.

Nonetheless, people tend to see clergy, such as myself as being on a higher level of commitment to Jesus.

People sometimes ask how I came to be a pastor. It isn't an easy question to answer.

Over forty years ago when I entered into the ordination process, what were my motivations? There was within me a desire to serve God, to be an instrument of God's love, to share the Gospel.

But as time passed I came to recognize that I had other motivations as well. There was certainly that desire to be perceived as a “good person.” But looking back there was more: I viewed pastors as strong people that weak people leaned on for support. And I desperately wanted to be a strong person.

I wanted that because truth be told I was in fact pretty fragile inside.

I remember there were times in my early years as a pastor when feelings of fraudulence would come over me. I'd put on a suit to go visit somebody in the hospital – perhaps somebody decades older than myself with vastly more experience of life. I would think to myself, “*Who am I to pretend to have some wisdom, some strength to bring to this person?*” I felt like a kid wearing a costume.

Those of you who have heard me preach for a while are familiar with the story I've told of how in my late twenties and quite lonely, I made an ill-advised decision to marry a woman. From almost the outset the marriage was a disaster, and the marriage only lasted a couple of years. It was an exceedingly painful time for me. When I began to recognize that the marriage might well end in divorce, the thought that occurred to me was that this would mean I would have to leave the ministry, because my fraudulence would be exposed. Such a public failure in marriage would render me disqualified to be a pastor.

Mysteriously though, when the time drew near for me to do the thing I had dreaded – to announce that I was getting divorced -- a strange peace came over me. After all the energy I had devoted to managing how people perceived me, I now knew I had no control over what people thought of me once they received my announcement. It was in God's hands. I surrendered inwardly, and I felt calm.

For the most part, my congregation received the news graciously. I experienced tenderness like that which Jesus offered James and John.

The experience changed my understanding of what being a pastor is all about. As a great evangelist once said, I am just one beggar telling other beggars where to find food – that is, with Jesus. Pastors don't live on a higher plain of existence, and we shouldn't pretend to. We're all in this together.

If you ask me about what motivates me now as I go about my work as a pastor some forty years later, I can't tell you that my motivations have become pure. They're still mixed. But this is what has changed: I no longer am overcome by feelings of fraudulence. I've let go of that misguided notion of what it is to be a pastor.

The experience of going through a divorce as a pastor led me to appreciate the story of the disciples more deeply. There was a kind of breaking that was necessary for me to undergo regarding my preoccupation with being perceived in a certain light. In some sense it was necessary for the disciples to be broken – the experience that they were forced to undergo when all hell broke loose in Jerusalem. It was extraordinarily painful, forcing them to see the parts of themselves at which they hadn't wanted to look. But in the great humbling they underwent a greater opening appeared within them for God's Spirit to move. That which was hidden inside them began to bear fruit.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus meets us with absolute love where we are -- with our mixed motives and our self-deceptions. But Jesus doesn't intend to leave us as we are. He intends to lead us into a deeper understanding of ourselves and a deeper understanding of his love. He intends to lead us home.