

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Proper 24, Year B
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Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus 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?” 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.”

God’s Laboratory of Reconciliation and Transformation

I had the great privilege of going to our Diocesan conference center, Lake Logan, this week. Lake Logan is a beautiful place in a river valley with mountains surrounding it. It is also the site of Camp Henry, our diocesan camp where kids gather each summer and during the school year for retreats. I was there for clergy conference so it was a time with Bishop José and Canon Augusta and all of the priests of Western North Carolina. They invited Luke Timothy Johnson, a renowned New Testament scholar from Emory University, who shared with us his

work on St. Paul and the ministry of reconciliation that God was doing through the early Church and that continues to this day through the likes of you and me.

Now, I don't know about you, but whenever I have retreats or conferences like this, every single time I absolutely do not have the "time" to go to them. I think of all the things I have to do which won't get done while I'm away. Yet every single time, I just try to go. I just go in faith because I know that when things are busiest -- that is exactly when we need rest and renewal most of all.

Do you know what one of the most special parts of the retreat was for me? I got to go to church! We had a closing Eucharist and the only thing I had to do was to sit in a pew and to worship. I did not officiate or celebrate or read or help in any way. I just said the responses that you say each Sunday and I received the grace of God through our liturgy. I was able to reach out my hands and receive Communion. I was able to be fed by Christ and by his Church. What a gift it is to be able to gather at all! What a gift it is to find in God an oasis where our bodies and souls can be hydrated! What a gift it is to be the Church in such a beautiful place with such beautiful people!

One of the things that Luke Timothy Johnson said that resonated most with me was that the Church is God's instrument in the world for reconciliation and transformation. More specifically, he said that it's a people that God is looking for. It's a people that God is shaping. This is not an individual thing even though, if you are anything like me, you are likely to forget the incredible privilege that comes with life in Christian community.

Like James and John in our Gospel reading, we come to Jesus -- even if only on an internal level -- with some demands and expectations. We have been taught from such a young age to compete, to stand out, to climb the highest, to run the fastest, to be the best. We have been taught to secure control, to find some kind of power, to take hold of life by the horns. Of course, none of those things are bad or wrong, but here's the question: what happens when our demands or even our cultural norms -- gosh, what happens when our personal baggage -- comes into relationship with Christ and with his church?

Last week in our Gospel reading, we saw one of these encounters. A rich man who was willing to follow the rules of religion stood before Jesus and the community of disciples that God was shaping. He was able to keep every rule he had ever been taught without anyone else truly involved. He could keep the rules on an individual spiritual journey. But when his love of possessions met Christ and the community of the cross he was shaping, the man was -- first of all -- truly loved (perhaps for the first time in his entire life), and that love of Christ revealed a truth to this guy about his relationship with wealth and then issued an invitation for him to join the community forming around this Jesus of Nazareth.

Today's Gospel reading is very similar in that way. Here we have two disciples who are already following Jesus. They've left behind careers, family, and culture to be a part of this fellowship Jesus is forming. We get to witness the clash that happens when the ways of the world come into contact with Christ and his Church. "Jesus, we have left everything for you," James and John said to him, "and now we want you to do something for us. We are willing to die for you so let us sit next to you once our coup is complete. Grant us this one thing!"

This is the demand made by Alpha men and women (usually men). They know they are worthy and ready to serve. James and John are executive types. They are hard working, highly skilled, well-educated Episcopalians who like to go fishing in their free time!

But there is an inverse of this too that is the exact same. Perhaps you can relate to it. We sometimes come to Christ saying, "Lord, I'm willing to follow you and be a part of your church, but I must insist you let me stay at the back of the crowd. I'll just sit over here where no one will notice. I don't have much to offer anyway. There are other people who can lead. How could I fit in? What expertise do I have to offer? Why would my voice matter?"

Some of us have been shaped to compete and stand out. Some of us have been shaped to think that we can't offer much at all, to keep quiet, to stand back, to step aside. There is a clash that happens when encountering Christ and his Church with our demands, with our expectations. When the disciples heard the demands of James and John, doesn't our text say that they were angry? There was conflict, resentment, and frustration in their church.

And it was not because the other ten disciples had all of their issues worked out. No. They were flawed, broken, and confused much of the time. It's because that's how Church works. That's the entire point of life in Christian community. We get to share in it but we bring with us all of our baggage. We bring our hurts and pains, our interpersonal flaws, our hopes and dreams, our failures, our family issues, our demands, our shame. We come and we bring all of that to this laboratory of reconciliation and transformation called the Church, the Body of Christ, the Christian community.

This process of grace is constantly playing out here, on the ground, at St. John. For example, how does a congregation of vaccinated people treat the few people who are not going to get vaccinated? Can we insist on respecting their dignity as human beings, even in relationships mixed with disagreement and a bit of fear? Or, again: how does a parish that is used to a high level of activity and organization deal with the strains of membership who are just a bit more reluctant to participate as each person tries to live within their own comfort zone? Our expectations and hopes can cause friction as we share life together, but like stones in a bag, we might just rub one another smooth in this process.

Personally, I think it's a crazy idea to change the world through calling broken and messed up people into community with each other in the name of Christ. Shouldn't we say, shouldn't Christ say, get your life together and *then come* and join us? But that's not what he told me. And that's not what the Church told me when I was an angry teenager upset about my family falling apart. Or when I was a newly wed who just moved to the city with no job and no connections. That's not what Jesus told the rich guy last week or James and John this week. That's not what he's saying to you today. I was always told, "Grab a seat here. It's good to see you," or "Let's get lunch after the service," or "I can pick you up next week if you'd like." You'd have to be God to dream up a plan this crazy. And it's going to be messy at times if we truly show up. But I have to admit that the only lasting change I have ever known in my life -- the only transformation that has been more than skin deep -- has happened here, where broken people have risked sharing their lives with one another in this laboratory of reconciliation and transformation that we call the Church.