

Because We're Worth It

October 17, 2021

“Because we're worth it.”

James and John may have simply been ahead of their time. When asking to sit on either side of Jesus in glory, they could have simply grabbed a slogan from L'Oreal – the shampoo that gives you great-looking hair because “You're worth it.”

Are we not the same as James and John? We use customer rewards cards to get special deals. Five orders at Panera gets you \$2 off your next sandwich. Frequent fliers get free flights, although you may have to endure unruly passengers. James and John were just ahead of their time when asking for preferential treatment. To hear Matthew tell the story, it was James' and John's Mom who perfected “comps.” If anyone would have agreed with “You're worth it,” it would have been her.

So how did we get from disciple training to seeking the best seats in the house? Let's begin by asking questions about the passage. Here are mine:

- Who are James/John?
- Why do they ask Jesus for preferential treatment?
- How did this even come up?
- What baptism is Jesus talking about? Aren't all baptisms alike?
- Why did the other disciples get so angry with James and John?
- Why does Jesus talk about the Gentiles as “others?” Isn't Jesus for all people?
- We know we should be servants, but slaves? Isn't that demeaning?
- What is the ransom about?
- What stories surround this passage?

It would take too long to answer all these questions, and I'll bet you have even more than I do. But let's consider some of them while we look at this text again.

James and John, two brothers, come to Jesus, couching their request in a mildly snarky comment: “We want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Jesus reserves judgment, but gets ready for yet another teachable moment. He asks them what would be their request.

They state their demand: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory.” At least Mark relates the request as self-generated. In the Gospel of Matthew, Mom makes the case for her two sons. Even though the other disciples may resent the brothers for beating them to the punch, they must wonder whether their commitment has been worth it.

Early in their disciple years, the idea of “fishers of men” was quite appealing. It had a great ring to it – great for drumming up business. Talk about being loved by all. But the disciples began to notice the cost of following Jesus. It meant giving up a lot: family, a livelihood, free time, security, the list goes on. Now they travelled with only the “tunic” on their back and a pair of sandals. A home of their own? Nope, they relied on the charity of others. Some, and probably most, wondered if this commitment to follow Jesus was worth it. “Tell me again, why are we doing this??”

Lately, the disciples heard Jesus talk about some mighty strange stuff.

“He thinks he’s going to get hassled by the authorities in Jerusalem. A few times, he even said he’d die on a cross.”

The disciples, like many who listened to them with rapt attention, expected he’d not only vanquish the authorities, but he’d conquer the entire Roman empire. “We’re just days away from glory, Jesus.”

James and John knew how much they had given up. They also didn’t like Jesus’ dismal predictions of dying way too young. After all, where would that leave the disciples? But in any case, the brothers decide they better act while they still can. Why not ask for priority seating now? After all, “We’re worth it!”

Reverend Heidi Haverkamp, an Episcopal priest and author from the Chicago area, suggests perhaps another motivation. It could be the human quest for exclusivity. Eternally sitting around with Jesus would be the ultimate high. It may gratify James and John just to be there, or possibly more so to know who is left out. Think 10 other disciples, not to mention all of us! Either way, Jesus gently reframes the question. “You may not fully understand what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink? Can you be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

With an abundance of confidence, they claim “Sure we can. In fact, supersize it!”

Jesus finally brings up servant leadership once more. The Christian leader serves others. In fact, empties oneself to the extent of being a slave to all – ultimate service while garnering no social status whatsoever. Quite the opposite of the disciples’ expectations. Expecting total victory over the Romans, Peter objects to this nonsense. He withers when Jesus accuses him as Satan! Jesus wonders how will they ever carry on after his death if they refuse to believe him now.

Only Peter perceives something special about Jesus, identifying him as the Messiah. His epiphany may be short-lived.

The author of Mark puts in two stories before and after the disciple stories. We’ve heard them over the last few months:

- Jesus calms the storm, showing the disciples how they too will bring peace against great earthly power.
- He contends with his disciples’ debate about who is the greatest. He likens leadership to the innocence and simple caring of children.
- Now, the preferential seating in glory story. Jesus challenges the disciples to accept the same cup he will take.

As bookends to these stories, Jesus heals two blind men. Both of the men hear the itinerant Jesus approach. They want to see him, asking him to cure their blindness. Jesus grants their requests. Both men immediately follow Jesus. It seems they understand Jesus’ mission better than the disciples.

To be fair, the disciples sound a lot like us. And the gospel of Mark hardly compliments the disciples. The author of Mark emphasizes human frailty, both in Jesus and the disciples. Excited for their mission, the disciples throw themselves into preaching and healing only

understanding a tenth of what is expected. We've all experienced that at some point: sometimes as new parents, other times taking on a new job, we may have even volunteered to lead a ministry here at Union. Rarely do we appreciate what we're called to do in the beginning. We usually grow into our roles, with lots of bumps and bruises along the way.

The other disciples grumble when they hear James' and John's request. After all, they've put in just as much time and effort; why shouldn't they get preferential treatment too? Their world, as in ours, seeks the fittest, best looking, wealthiest and probably the most treacherous to rise to the top. We worship those who rise above the fray, vanquishing their enemies, emerging victorious over all comers. All too often, we may accept some servant tasks in our lives, but the idea of slave to all seems repugnant, if not just plain unhealthy.

At the end, Jesus talks about being the ransom for many. Lots of us have understood this to mean an atonement for our sins. But he doesn't talk about atonement here. He references the ransom as one would for freeing a slave. It is to lift people from whatever enslaves them: oppression, corruption, greed, addiction, and/or empire. The list goes on.

Where does that leave us today? Once we have heard Jesus claims of suffering and death on a cross, should we expect the same fate? Would we make the same decisions to follow him to the cross? Could we not just add a few dollars to the collection plate?

The stories we've read are not just a historical recounting. We, too, are those same disciples. Jesus speaks to us as he did 2,000 years ago. When we understand our mission is servant leadership, even becoming slaves to all, we start with accepting responsibility to serve others. Families serve as great training ground. Tempting as it may be, we learn to balance our wants and desires with the needs of those around us. Many sleepless parents know all too well the care of an infant first coming home. Stumbling into the nursery, they calm a hungry baby before grabbing just a few hours rest. We make sure our kids have food, clothing, and opportunities in school and extracurricular activities. As our parents did for us, we care for them as old age restricts their ability to remain at home.

Here at Union, many serve others first:

- Teaching reading skills to children with dyslexia
- Teaching reading skills to adults who never learned to read in their youth
- Advocating for prisoners in our community and throughout the state
- Marching for Black Lives Matter
- Voting for candidates supporting peace and justice

Jesus' example to serve others extends to those we don't know. We donate winter coats for children in need; we buy Girl Scout cookies to support all girls, not just those in our troop. We visit the prisons to bring hope to those who may never leave. We give money to help those a world away, trusting those on the ground will serve them well.

This past week, I toured the Holy Family Convent in Manitowoc as part of a class at UWGB. Besides following delightful Sr. Caritas through all the nooks and crannies of the Motherhouse, I spotted a small plaque that parroted a verse from Matthew:

“Shout from the rooftops, not in words, but with your very lives!” Jesus asks nothing less from us. Before you walk out the doors today, think of two ways you can shout from the rooftops with your lives.

Reverend Lee Canipe, then a pastor at Murfreesboro Baptist Church in North Carolina, reminds us “It’s not so much what we do as it is the kind of people we become when we serve others.”

Will we get preferential seating “in Jesus’ glory?” James and John didn’t, at least not on this side of the grave. In fact, we’re told the best seats in the house went to two bandits – on either side of Jesus at Calvary. But Mark is trying to tell us that preferential seating doesn’t matter. Jesus promises the reward is in the serving. We need not ask; it’s already ours.

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