

# One More Time...

October 20, 2024

Isaiah 53:4-12

Mark 10:35-45

My first job for which I was paid – other than coins from the Tooth Fairy – was as a performing magician. I did three shows at the Blandford Fair in Blandford, Massachusetts, when I was around thirteen. And I got paid for it.

I wasn't terribly good, but I was better then than I would be now. I've forgotten a lot of what I knew.

Most of what I knew came from the writings of Henry Hay, particularly his 1947 book *Learn Magic*. I do remember something from that book. More than once, Hay urged his readers to slow down and give the audience a chance to grasp what was going on. He'd say something like, "Hold up a coin, and count slowly to three. By that time, the slow one in the back knows you're holding a coin."

And if you have to, repeat yourself. Repeat yourself again, until everybody knows what you said. Later in life I learned a similar formula: Tell them what you'll tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

By this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus had been struggling to convince his disciples that his journey to Jerusalem would end in arrest, crucifixion, and death – and that this would be OK. It hadn't gone well. In chapter eight, when Jesus first said it, Simon Peter's protest had been so forceful that Jesus lashed out with, "Get behind me, Satan!" In chapter nine, Jesus said it again, and none of his disciples dared to ask him what he was talking about. They did, however, start arguing about who was greatest.

Jesus told them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." You might recall that I preached on that story, asking, "Who wants to be first?" and suddenly nobody did.

Here in chapter ten, Jesus told the twelve for the third time that he would be killed and resurrected. The lectionary, somewhat strangely, skips that section, and jumps to what we read this morning, when James and John asked for a special place at Jesus' side. Let's be careful, however, to be sure of what they meant.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson writes at Working Preacher, "James and John misunderstand the glory they are pursuing actively, for Jesus' 'baptism is not a matter of action but of passion. Their boastful assurance 'We are able!' earns a response from Jesus whose irony can only be grasped

by those who read to the end of the story: you bet you're going to undergo this baptism, but it doesn't mean what you think it means."

They thought it meant the liberation of the people of Israel from foreign domination, which included the Hasmonean monarchs who were so clearly lackeys of the Romans. Goodbye Caesar; goodbye Herod: Welcome, King Jesus! A new-crowned monarch would need a royal court, you see, a collection of aides and officials to pass along Jesus' directions and, of course, receive near-royal honors themselves. The most powerful of them would stand to the right and to the left in a formal setting.

They thought they were asking for what other civilizations might call a Prime Minister, a Chancellor, a Grand Vizier. It's an impressive ambition for a couple of fishermen from a backwater part of the world.

Debie Thomas, writing at JourneyWithJesus.net, notes that James and John did a few things right. "First, the two brothers place their full faith in the right person... Second, they are ambitious for the reign of God. They expect and want Jesus to be glorified; they expect and want the world's wrongs to be righted... Thirdly, James and John ask. They approach Jesus boldly, and make their request with hearts full of confidence. Is the request tacky? Yes. Is it borne of ignorance and immaturity? Yes. Are some of the motives behind the request selfish? Yes. And yet. They ask."

As D. Mark Davis writes at LeftBehindAndLovingIt, "Since this is the third time that Jesus has disclosed his impending death, and the third reaction, a question would be whether James and John have a sense of what Jesus' 'glory' really is. The twelve's reactions to the first two disclosures would indicate that none of them gets or accepts that death is in the package."

Do any of us, really?

One more time, Jesus brought the twelve together to tell 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; instead, 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."

One more time.

Mark quoted Jesus on this theme twice. Matthew quoted Jesus on this theme of greatness via service four times. Luke made it five times.

I mean, one more time, right?

John didn't really quote Jesus on this, but he made sure to demonstrate Jesus' emphasis on greatness through service, when he described Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper.

They didn't get it, so Jesus said it one more time. I would guess that some in the early church didn't get it, either, so Matthew and Luke said it one more time and time again. I would guess that when John got to writing, there was enough of a gap between words and actions that instead of saying it one more time, he wrote about Jesus doing it one more time.

One more time.

What if we did understand greatness as service? What if we reserved honor for those who help other people? What if we provided resources and power to those who share it with those around them? What if we made sure that we reward those who lift up (and who are lifted up), rather than those who take and grab and keep and hoard?

What if we honored Jesus with magnanimity, not might?

What would the world look like?

Just to start, a world devoted to serving neighbor and stranger would not go to war. If you prize the welfare of others, you don't kill them. Or rape them. Or plunder them. Crime rates would plummet, partially because if you care about someone else, you don't steal from them, but also because the motives for stealing drain away. If you're hungry, someone will care enough to feed you. If you're out of work, people will help you find a way until there's work again.

For that matter, people who care about one another work as best they can, because it's one way to contribute and to share.

Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and all the other prejudices and oppressions also lose their foundations. When I make your welfare an important thing in my life, how can I accept anything that diminishes you? How can I permit someone else to denigrate you for being who you are, or prevent you from achieving the good you are capable of? How can I withhold my support for you being you?

I won't pretend that this will be a paradise. Even if every human being fully commits to every other human being, the natural world will not. Floods, droughts, fires, earthquakes, storms, and volcanic eruptions will shatter and disrupt lives. Imperfect human understandings of our impact on the world could lead to things as serious as climate change.

At the interpersonal level, my commitment to your well-being does not mean that I understand your needs. I may get it wrong. I may mistakenly hurt or even injure you. So no. It's not a paradise in the way we often envision one.

But isn't it a lot better than what we have? Isn't it worth dreaming? Isn't it worth working for? Isn't it worth changing ourselves for?

Getting there – well, that's the hard part, for certain. Our structures of power, prejudice, and privilege are well established. Christianity has made relatively little headway against them in two thousand years, and has often adopted them as its own during that time.

So. Small steps. Make positive choices for the welfare of other people. Do the work to find out what people actually need before you do something they don't need.

Check yourself for your own preconceptions and privilege. Will an action benefit you? Examine it carefully. It may also serve others more than yourself. If it's better for you than anyone else, though, and especially if it harms someone else, maybe try something different.

Jesus said it to his disciples one more time. He tried it with them one more time, and he's trying it with us one more time.

One more time, and one more time, and one more time.

The destination is worth the effort.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*