

Ransom
March 17, 2024

Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church

Pastor John Scott

We continue our sermon series called *Christ For You*. This week, we heard two different readings, one from Jeremiah and the other from Mark about James and John asking Jesus for a favor, other disciples' reactions, and how Jesus teaches them about, "who is the greatest?" And when I think about that gospel reading, I always put myself in the place of the other disciples, not James and John, or Jesus of course, but the other ten who were watching this happen. You may feel in the same spot watching James and John say, "Lord, make us better than our friends." That is a rough one. This seems like a very simple episode, and yet Jesus, in His response, makes it incredibly eloquent. Not just eloquent, but incredibly deep. In fact, it cuts us to our hearts.

Our series is all about understanding the Law and the Gospel, that the Law shows us our sinfulness—it points a mirror back at us, or it reminds us of the curbs that are there, that we are not supposed to trespass; and the Gospel then gives us the good news that in the midst of our brokenness, Jesus has come to save us—and we see these two things happening in Scripture. Hopefully, over the last few weeks, as we have gone through this Lenten journey together, you are seeing these things happen in your life as well. It is very possible that maybe now you have looked at sometimes when people have done things to you, or said things to you that were uncharitable, or just plain mean. And maybe they have come to you asking for forgiveness, and you think, "Well, that's law." The mirror has been had. So, what do you need to give them? The gospel, the good news, the forgiveness. Or, maybe you have been on the other side of that, maybe you have done things that you know you should not have done. Have you had the strength, through the Spirit, to ask for forgiveness?

This is where we find ourselves today, just a couple of weeks before Easter. Next Sunday, we will have palm branches, and you are celebrating the Coming of the King to our midst. But by the time we leave next Sunday,

our eyes are going to be focused on the story that we know continues, the story that continues leading Jesus toward His betrayal, toward His death, and to His resurrection. We know this story, and we know as we go through it in the next few weeks, Law and Gospel are going to be so vivid in our lives.

Today we get an incredible picture of what that was like for Jesus' disciples as they followed Him into Jerusalem. As they were making their way into Jerusalem for the last time, all of these things are happening to show them who He is and what He would do for them. The disciples and the crowd, not just the Twelve but so many more, are following Jesus, going to Jerusalem. He is walking ahead of them. Remember a few weeks ago, we talked about following Jesus and trying to stay as close as you can to Him because that was the goal, to have the dust of the teacher from His feet go up upon your clothes. That meant you were following Him closely enough that you could pay attention to everything that He did, so that you could do what He did.

This was the time. They were walking right behind Him, and they were amazed, and they were afraid. Both of these things happened at the same time, this amazement of, *What is God doing in our midst? How is this Jesus going to make it through this time in Jerusalem?* They knew the dangers ahead. They knew that people wanted Him dead. They knew that going to Jerusalem was incredibly perilous. So, they were amazed, and they were afraid.

This is a great picture of what it means to follow Jesus, even today—to be amazed at who He is in our midst and see what He is doing, but then also to wonder when we see the brokenness in this world, when we see the brokenness in our lives, when we experience the suffering that is so real and so difficult, fear tends to have this tendency to take over.

They were amazed, and they were afraid. Jesus then refocuses them. He reminds them that He is doing all this so that He can go to the cross, so that He can be killed for them, so that He could rise from the dead, and bring them life. And they are still having a tough time understanding what it is that He is going to do. They do not have any conception of Him.

Today, who do you follow? This is really taking the Law and Gospel down to how we live this out right now. *Who do you follow? How do you spend your time? Who do you spend it with? What do you spend it doing?* In all of these ways, you kind of show who you follow. And I think that if we had a second answer besides Jesus, I bet the next person that we would say that we follow is probably ourselves. We know what we want. We know what we are all about. We know what makes us happy. We know what makes us unafraid. We know what we would like to do. We know what we want out of other people. We know what we want out of the world or out of our careers. We follow our hearts. Now, when I ask the question, *Who do you follow*, I am assuming there is only one answer to that. So who do we follow? If both of these things are true, how do we make this distinction? How do we understand this?

As the disciples are following Jesus into Jerusalem, they are following Him and following Him alone. Do we do the same? Well, when we are focused on ourselves, we end up like James and John. James and John wanted glory. They wanted to see the glory of the Lord shining around them. They wanted to be as close as they possibly could be to it. These sons of Zebedee, these sons of Thunder, James and John, come up to Jesus and say to Him, “Lord. Give us what we ask.” Jesus plays along, and Jesus says, “Sure, why not? What is it that you want?” And they say, “Grant to us to sit at your right and at your left in your glory.”

In your glory, not in the difficult times, not in the stuff He is going to have to go through, but in the glory of it, in the glory of the kingdom. Let me sit at your right, the seat of power, the seat of salvation, and on the left, the seat of help and of assistance, of holding up the arms. Let us sit there. And the other ten must be thinking, “What’s going on?”

Is this a crazy thing for them to ask? Let us go back. If you have read some scripture here, James and John did have a bit of a special relationship with Jesus. It was James and John and Peter who were the inner three that got to speak with Jesus at different times before the rest of the apostles. So maybe it is not quite as outlandish for them to ask this because they were really close to Jesus. Maybe they are cutting Peter out, but that’s about it. *Grant to us to sit at your right hand and your left and your glory.*

Jesus responds to them, “You do not really understand exactly what you are asking of me.” He says this, interestingly, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Are you baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” They say, “We are able.” I am not sure they fully understood what He was saying to them. Do you understand what He was saying to them? Can you get the sense of what Jesus is saying? *Are you able to bring new life like I am able to bring new life? Are you able to drink the cup of suffering that I am able to drink from?*

They have been with Jesus this whole time. They have seen all the things that He has done. They have been in His inner circle, and they think, “I have been following you so closely that I must be able to do this.” They say, “We are able.” Are we really able?

In this Lent season, even those of us who are seasoned followers of Jesus are called to look within, not in order to figure out how we can best serve ourselves, or how we can best figure out what the desires of our hearts are and follow them, but we are called to look within ourselves to be reminded that we are *not* able, to be reminded that we are *not* enough, to be reminded that as much as we try, we *cannot* get rid of the brokenness that plagues us. So, we see James and John brashly saying, “Yes, we are able to do all this”, and there is a disconnection in what we know of our lives and what we see in the scripture. Jesus says to them, “Well, all right, well, you are going to drink the cup that I am. You are going to be baptized like I am. You will receive the suffering that I receive, and you will receive the new life that I will give you, but I cannot grant you what you want. I cannot give you the right and the left in my kingdom because it is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

You see, Jesus turns around the idea that we are able to position ourselves in the Kingdom of God for our glory and twists it around and takes it to the other side to say, “Look. This gift of being in the position of great power in the kingdom, in this glory, is going to be given as a gift. It has already been prepared for those whom God has loved and designed it to be for. I cannot just give it to you.” In fact, the movement that Jesus makes is to take the power away from James and John, to help them realize that it is not about them and what they are able to do, but instead, it is about

the gift of grace that God will give to His people through Jesus for whom He is preparing to go to the cross.

You see, this whole episode reminds us that it is not about focusing on ourselves. Even as James and John focused on their own glory, their own needs, and their own desires of their hearts, even though it might have been from a great place, that is not where we are called to focus. We are called to focus on Jesus alone.

It is in Him and through Him and only through Him that we receive anything, that we receive the bits of joy that we receive today, that we receive life everlasting, it is only through Him. We are not able, but He is. The Law in this section is all about seeing that when we prop ourselves up, when we put up that mirror in front of us, and we think, “Hey, I am not looking so bad. I have done some really good stuff this week. I have helped out a lot of people,” and when we take the next step to saying, “Well, that must mean that God must love me more today than He did yesterday or that I might be accepted by Him more than I was yesterday,” then we have missed the point.

When we look in that mirror, and we see, “Yes, I have done these, these things that have helped others, but boy, those other things. I fall short of perfection. I need someone to help me,” we focus back on Jesus. That is the goal. That is what Jesus is trying to help James and John see.

In the end, Jesus says this to all of the disciples, not just us, not just James and John. He says the Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. You see, Jesus’ life is a *ransom*. It is this payment given on behalf of others that will rescue His people. He gives His own life to pay for those who could not. He goes in the place of those who could not. This is what Jesus came to do, as opposed to the kings of this world, who take for themselves, who serve themselves, who take control over all things to serve their needs and their desires.

Jesus gives up everything. He serves you; He serves me; He serves the whole world; gives Himself up as a ransom. What Jesus is trying to show His disciples as they follow Him is a way of giving up a life to win back others. The way of Jesus is all about giving up His life to win back the

world. This, if we are following Jesus and seeing that, is what we see, that He gives up everything that He has, everything that He would desire to do, in order that you would be reconnected with God, that you would be brought back to Him.

He goes on and says this about His people. He says, “You are not going to be like the world. You are not going to be like the kings who gather things to themselves for their own hearts’ desires. Instead, whoever is going to be great among you must be the servant. Whoever will be first among you, like James and John were asking to be first, must serve everyone.”

This is an incredible reversal. It takes everything that we think about the way that we organize ourselves, the way that we look at the world, the way that we look at other people, and it changes it all around. It says, “Look, the people who are the loudest, the people who have the most power, the people who can change your life with the snap of their fingers, are not the most powerful of all. Instead, the ones who give up their power and comfort, the ones who give up their desire, the ones who give up their time, and the ones who give up their energy for the sake of others, are the ones who we look to and see Jesus most clearly.”

There has been a movement in, even in businesses, to talk about, “How do we serve people? How do we serve our customers? How do we serve the people that we do business with?” And it comes from this idea, this innate sense that God has built into us *to serve one another*. And it is incredibly powerful when people know that you love them by you giving up something of yours for them. The connection that you forge is bigger than anything else.

Jesus here, though, is specifically talking about the church. The way that we talk to one another, the way that we do what God has called us to do, we are here to serve and not put ourselves above others. Again, He is calling us back to see that it is not about me. It is not about what I would like. It is not about what I would want. It is not about my preferences. It is about, “How do we see Jesus clearly? How do we show Him to the world? How do we help other people see Jesus and how much He loves them?”

And how they can be connected with Him, not through what they do, but through what He has already done.

And so, we think about that here. If Jesus means this, if this is the good news today, that Jesus has given up Himself for us, that He loves us, and that He calls His church to do the same, what does it look like if we take this seriously? What does it look like in your life if you become a servant of all? If by doing so, you are able to show who Jesus is, how much He loves others, how much He gives people better than what they deserve, and how His forgiveness is perfect in all ways, how would that change your relationships? How would that change your relationship with your husband or your wife or your kids or grandkids? The people that you work with, the people that work for you, how would that change things? Now, of course, you cannot go completely the other way of this in this world. We cannot. God's kingdom is not made perfect right here yet. We are waiting for that day—every Sunday is a little Easter where we see glimpses of that happen. But when Jesus returns, yes, that is what it is going to be like. But until that day, we are called to give people glimpses of that future. And what if we did that by the way we served? By the way that we put ourselves lower than the people around us. What if we did that here? What if we did that within our congregation? What if we consistently said that my needs, like what I like and what I want is not as important as the people who have not heard about Jesus yet? What if we gave up our time and our energies and the things that God has blessed us with for the explicit purpose of helping people who are not yet sitting in these pews around you? To not just hear about Jesus, but to really be brought into a relationship with you, with our congregation, with people, so that they might see Jesus' love tangibly. What if we gave up those things that bother us, those things that we think that we need so that Jesus can be seen clearly? I think that the picture of that kind of church is exactly what Jesus is talking about when He says let it not be so among you to rule like the rulers of the world, instead let us be different. Let us be unique. Let us be focused on helping others see that the kingdom of God is at hand. That Jesus is here, that His way is here, and let you be the people who show others the way. Let God's Spirit work through you so that others may see me.

I think if that were to happen, then we would be joyful and be joyfully welcoming so many more people to a faith in Jesus that gives them life. Not just life today, but life eternal. This is my prayer for us.

Let us close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you, Lord, for being with us, for reminding us today that we are called to be servants of all, that we are called not to see ourselves and work for our own glory, but that we are called to see you singularly, to see you alone and what you have done for us and how it has changed our lives and to be ready and excited, to welcome others into that same life-changing faith. We pray that your spirit would work in us and through us and among us, that the people in this community that we see, that we know, would see you through us. And that by seeing you, Jesus, that they would ask questions, that they would wonder, and that, Lord, you would give us answers, that we might help them see that you are God who loves them, who is with them, who cares for them, and has saved them through what Jesus has done for them.

In all of this, Lord, we give you thanks. We give you praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.