

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
October 17, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

Mark 10:35-45

But Jesus said to them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38 N.R.S.V.)

The Price of Glory

James and John were ambitious. They wanted to be the greatest in the kingdom, to sit on the right and left hand of Jesus. They were ambitious. Is that such a bad thing?

Granted the other disciples were really angry at James and John when they heard about it. But perhaps they were just jealous. Granted, James and John had not really done anything to earn a high place in the kingdom - they were just hoping they could get special perks because they were in tight with the boss's son.

But is it wrong for a Christian to want to be more, to do more, to be great? Is it wrong to be ambitious? Granted, being ambitious is not one of the fruits of the Spirit. I know. I looked. Galatians 5:22 & 23 ". . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." So, there is no mention of ambition.

At the same time if it were not for the ambition, the passion, the drive of the Christians who came before us, Christianity would not have spread around the world. If it were not for the ambition of Christians who came before us, this church would not be here.

If you notice in our passage from Mark, Jesus does not rebuke James and John for wanting to be great. What he does is redefine what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. He says, "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; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the 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." (Vs. 42-45)

Jesus challenges James and John, "Are you willing to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" To their credit, James and John say, "We are able."

And indeed with Christ's help, they were able and they did become great.

So I want to take a bit of time this morning to explore Christian greatness. What does it mean to drink the cup that Jesus drank and to be baptized with the baptism that he was baptized with?

Drinking from Jesus' cup and being baptized with Jesus' baptism means being willing to pay the price that no one else will pay.

When Charla and I were co-pastors at the Covington Church in Ohio, one of the elementary girls in the church showed great promise as a gymnast. She was invited to attend a training school in Texas with the famous gymnastic coach Bela Karolyi. Karolyi coached the Romanian Olympic gold medalist Nadia Comaneci who was the first Olympic games gymnast to be awarded a perfect score. He also coached Fairmont's Mary Lou Retton to Olympic gold and a perfect score. So being invited to his training camp was a big deal.

So this young girl from the tiny town of Covington, Ohio went to Texas. She was so excited to be training with Bella Karolyi. But once she got there she discovered that her entire life consisted of eating, sleeping, school work, and gymnastics. There was no time for family or social life. She would basically have to give up the rest of her childhood. Before long she decided that the price of fleeting sports glory was more than she was willing to pay. So she came back home. And personally, I think she made a wise decision.

Which brings us to the question of greatness in the kingdom of God. Are we willing to pay the price for lasting glory in the kingdom? The world is full of the fair weather friends of Jesus. Everywhere we see those who will follow Jesus as long as it is convenient and easy. But when the rough times come and sacrifices must be made - only the great continue.

Pastor John Henry Jowett once said, "Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing." Think about that, ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. Every follower of Jesus has a ministry. But not everyone is willing to pay the cost of effective ministry. Ministry that is world changing, even if that ministry is only world changing for two or three people, will have a cost. Are we willing to pay the price for greatness in the kingdom?

What does it mean to drink from Jesus' cup and be baptized with Jesus' baptism? It means being willing to make the hard decisions that no one else will make. In the Old Testament, in the book of Deuteronomy God says, "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life."

It has been said that one of the attributes of God that he has bestowed on us is the ability to choose. Many people have the deluded idea that they can achieve their dreams of greatness without ever having to make hard decisions. That simply isn't true. Refusing to make hard decisions, means giving up one of the attributes of God, giving up one of the ways in which we are created in his image - the ability to choose.

And if we do choose, what will be the basis of the choice? Will we choose simply on the basis of what we think will make us happy? Or will we look for the godly choice? Will we ask

ourselves, which will make for a better world?

Part of what makes choosing to follow Jesus difficult is that it often feels like burning our bridges behind us. Most of us would rather leave our options open as long as we can. But when Jesus called the disciples to follow him, they made irreversible decisions.

Drinking from Jesus' cup requires us to make hard decisions, sometimes irreversible decisions.

I was thinking about the old T.V. show "Mission Impossible," some of you may remember it. The show always started with the agent listening to a recorded message. The message always began, "Your mission should you decide to accept it . . ." And then would come a description of the mission, followed by, "this message will self-destruct in three seconds." Spy stuff, you have to love it.

I thought of that because not once does Jesus ever say to his disciples, "Your mission if you decide to accept it . . ." Instead he says follow me and only after they agree to follow him do they find out what they will need to do.

Most often God only reveals his will to those who have already said they would follow it. If you want to be great in the kingdom, dare to write God a blank check - I don't know what you want me to do Lord, but if you will reveal your will to me, I will follow it - whatever the cost.

Drinking from Jesus' cup and being baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized also means being willing to give more than you expect to get.

There are two kinds of greatness in the world. One kind of greatness gives you the power to make others do what you want them to do. That kind of greatness seeks to accumulate power and material possessions. The effect of such greatness is fleeting indeed.

The other kind of greatness seeks to give away so much in service to others that the world is forever changed. That kind of greatness is caught up in the love of God and lasts forever.

I often say to couples who are about to be married. "Love is not a 50/50 proposition." Many people go into marriage thinking that they will give 50% and receive 50%. It never works that way. In the best relationships each person feels like he or she gives at least 60% and receives no more than 40%. It is human nature. Because we are so much more aware of how much work we are doing than we are of all the things our spouse does.

Here is the thing. Neither marriage nor love can long survive an attitude of keeping score. Love thrives when each partner is willing to give more than he or she expects to get back. Love thrives when each seeks first the happiness of the other.

The kingdom of God is all about living in love, because God is love. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Can we live into that promise? Can we stop counting and keeping score and be willing to give without expecting in return?

How about you? Do you have the ambition and the passion to be great in the kingdom? Are you willing to pay the price that others will not pay? Are you willing to make the hard decisions that others will not make? Are you willing to give more than others are willing to give - are you willing to give without keeping score?

This church is here today because at its heart have always been men and women who were willing to drink from Jesus' cup and to be baptized with the baptism that he was baptized with. They may not have names that are as well known as James and John, or Peter and Paul. But they were and are truly disciples of Jesus Christ. They may not someday sit at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus in glory. But they will surely be in his presence.

How about you? Are you made of such stuff? Do you have the passion and the ambition to be great in the kingdom, to serve Christ and make the world a better place because you walked on it?

Amen.