

## Where the Battle Rages

Mark 10:32-45

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Kyle Childress

Martin Luther, in his vivid and often dramatic style, once said, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point” (quoted in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 89).

Luther grabs our attention to remind us that biblical discipleship and confession of Christ is always situational. It is contextual. We can say all the right things, know all the correct doctrine, be orthodox in all our theology, show up at church three or four times a week, read our Bible every day, pray, tithe, sing in the choir, and still be unfaithful to Christ. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ is contingent upon one thing: to be faithful when it counts and where it counts – in the pitch of battle.

This morning I am telling you that our reading from Mark is exactly where the battle rages and it is here, where we Christians stand with Christ or flee in disgrace, where the church is the church – or not. Where we are Christ-like – or not. Where we take up the Cross – or not. It is here. It is here in Mark. It is here

across 2000 years of Christian history, and it is here today in the United States at this very point where the battle rages.

It is the place of power.

Jesus tells us that being faithful to him and to his Way is the Way of servanthood and the Way of the Cross. And here in Mark, as well as across 2000 years of history, and today in America, the battle rages over whether the church of Jesus Christ will follow him to the Cross or flee to the way of power, domination, and taking control.

This struggle is central to the entire Gospel of Mark. In our reading this morning, once more Jesus tries to teach the disciples that his Way is leading toward a confrontation with the Powers-that-Be in Jerusalem and he will be arrested, tortured, and executed. But he tells his uncomprehending listeners, that after three days he will rise (10:34).

And when I say, uncomprehending, I mean it. They don't get it. We don't get it. Back in chapter 8 Jesus talks about his coming confrontation with the Powers and his death and resurrection. Simon Peter, the leader of the disciples, takes Jesus aside and jumps his case, "Jesus, you've got to quit talking like this! You're the greatest. You're the Messiah. You're the One who will overthrow the Romans and make Judea great again!" Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You don't know what you're talking about! (8:32). In chapter 9, up on the Mountain of Transfiguration, Peter wants to stay on the mountaintop of power with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, but Jesus says, "No, it is time to head down into the valley where people are hurting." (9:2-8). Further in the same chapter, while traveling through Galilee, Jesus again tries to talk to the disciples about his heading toward

betrayal, the Cross, and that he will rise again. And once more, Mark says they do not understand what he is talking about.

They get to Capernaum and Jesus asks, “What have you fellows been arguing about?” Someone finally admits that they’ve been arguing about who is the greatest? Who is the best?

Let me make an aside. Dean Stroud is professor emeritus of German studies at the University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse. He is a former Presbyterian pastor who has done a study on how the Nazis used language and how sermons preached against Nazism used language. He points out that Nazi speech dealt in superlatives. “Hence, Hitler was the ‘smartest’ leader of the ‘bravest’ people of the ‘purist’ blood, and Germany was the ‘greatest country’ and ‘most glorious’ of nations in the most ‘heroic’ of wars and the struggles against the ‘worst’ of enemies in the ‘most dangerous’ of times.” Stroud quotes Victor Klemperer, and his book on Nazi language, “The superlative could be referred to as the most prevalent linguistic form of the language of the Third Reich, which is not surprising given that the superlative is the most obvious means by which a speaker or agitator can achieve a desired effect, it is the quintessential advertising mode” (Dean G. Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, p. 43).

So, here the disciples are arguing about superlatives. “I’m the greatest.” “No, I’m the greatest.” “But I’m the smartest,” and so on. In response, and I’m guessing another exasperated response, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). Then he takes a little child among them and says, “Here is our standard of what the kingdom is all about. If it is not good for a child, then it is not good.”

Then we come to our reading this morning, where brothers James and John, known among the other disciples as the “Sons of Thunder” for their impulsiveness, and brash personalities, and who, along with Simon Peter, form the inner circle of the disciples, come to Jesus, and say, “Teacher, we know we’re heading toward Jerusalem and the big election. If that doesn’t work, we’re ready for you to lead the messianic coup and insurrection. One way or another, we’re going to win and take over. When we do, when you take charge, we want you to appoint us to high positions of power so we can help you get things done, finish running these Romans out, consolidate power, and deport anyone we consider different. We’re going to put only our kind of people in places of power. We’re going to take back this nation and make it great again. And we’re going to use the state to enforce our wishes. So, when you win, appoint us to some positions of power.”

I think Jesus shakes his head, and says, “You guys cannot get it, can you? I mean you really don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t even know what I’m talking about. My way of ruling is by suffering servanthood, not by coercive power.”

The rest of the disciples hear James and John’s request and are angry and jealous. So, Jesus calls all of them together and said, “You know that there are some Big Shot types who believe they are entitled to rule and entitled to power and domination. They use power from the top. They lord it over everyone else. They wield coercive power to control and dominate. That’s the way they do things. But it is not that way among us. We live a different way. Whoever wants to be great must be a servant, for I came not to be served but to serve, even to give my life” (Mk. 10: 41-45).

Throughout Jesus' ministry, everywhere he went, he taught and preached and showed what his kind of servanthood looked like. When Jesus called his disciples together, he gave them this new way of life to live. A new way to deal with offenders – by forgiving them. A new way to deal with violence – by non-violent suffering. A new way to deal with money – by sharing it. A new way of relationships between woman and man, parent and child, people of different races, gay and straight people, trans people, people who are different in all kinds of ways, in which there can be seen a radical new vision of what it means to be human. This new way, “the Way,” is called the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the commonwealth of God, the beloved community.

This is the new kind of servanthood Jesus showed us when he healed the sick, served the poor, included the outcasts, listened to women and poor widows, lifted up children, ate with sinners, included the lost, the least, and the last, and challenged the dominating Powers-that-Be. The suffering servant Jesus threatened the social order, was a menace to the political order, disrupted the economic order and challenged the conventional order. All so he could show us God's new order. And it is this new order of God to which we are invited to become citizens and participants through baptism. And in baptism we are formed into a people, a community which seeks to practice what Jesus preached – the Way of suffering servanthood, the Way of the Cross. The New Testament calls it church.

But the church across 2000 years of history rarely gets this. We want power, just like Peter, and just like James and John. When Constantine the Great became Roman Emperor in 313 CE, the church said, “Wow! We finally made it. Now we can make things come out the way we want them to. We're in charge.” And ever since, we've been trying to be in charge one way or another. We've persecuted those we consider heretics, burned folks at the stake, declared war, invaded, led

crusades, instigated pogroms against Jews, enslaved people, exploited, extracted, dominated, controlled, and otherwise, used the power of the state in whatever way we can when we've been in charge.

We will still shout and sing about the cross but usually we relegate to a singular event that happened 2000 years ago and say that Jesus died on that cross to save us from our sins, but beyond that, we don't have much to say about it. We want to get saved by the cross, but we don't want to walk the Way of the Cross as our life together.

And Mark tells us this struggle, this battle over the way of power and domination or the power of suffering servanthood and the Cross has been going on since the beginning. Part of what makes it so insidious is that we can spout correct doctrine and teaching but still be unfaithful to Christ. So, for example, the very next story after this one this morning, is the story of the blind man Bartimaeus. He hears that Jesus of Nazareth is walking by and begins to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me!" He does not request positions of power but begs for mercy. And Bartimaeus ends up letting go of his one security, his cloak, and Mark says, "followed Jesus on the Way" (10:52). What a contrast to the rich, young, ruler, just before our story this morning in chapter 10, and who was correct in all the ways of teaching, scripture, and behavior but he couldn't give up his wealth and ended up walking away sadly (10:17-22). In other words, you can be right and proper in your belief system, know your Bible inside and out, but the only way to know Jesus is to give up power and follow him in the Way of servanthood and the Cross.

If we heed the call to discipleship and the Cross, it means we learn to discern what's going on from a different perspective, we begin to see differently from

those on top. We see from the bottom; from the perspective of those who are ground-down, beaten-down, worn-out, in poverty, and in poverty of spirit – you know what poverty of spirit is? It is when the person in poverty begins to believe deep down inside that he or she really is less than human. So, we learn see from the point of view of those who are diminished, defeated, in despair. We see from the position of weakness. When we're walking with Jesus and Bartimaeus is right there, too, we learn to listen and learn from our brother Bartimaeus. How does he see things, what's it like to be blind, to have to beg, to be in poverty your whole life?

All this does not mean we retreat into our enclaves and hunker down seeking to be pure from earthly power. Andre Trocme, the pastor of the people in the French village of Le Chambon, who sheltered the Jews from the Nazis, said, “Decent people who stay inactive out of cowardice or indifference when around them human beings are being humiliated and destroyed are the most dangerous people in the world” (Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, p. 266).

No, we must speak out and stand up for those without a voice, which includes speaking and making a stand for all Creation. We serve, we volunteer, we give of ourselves, we march, we vigil, we organize, we write letters, we give money, we pray, we feed the hungry, we heal the sick, we help children have hope and teach them the skills to read, communicate, think critically, and learn to make a difference for justice and goodness and love in this world.

And we vote! We don't take up swords (or guns) like Simon Peter will attempt in the Garden of Gethsemane. Instead, we show up and vote.

And then, no matter how the vote turns out, we keep on the Way of the Cross. We figure out how to be faithful to the Way of the Cross in whatever circumstances we're in.

All of this is what the New Testament and the church calls making a witness and giving a testimony.

Yesterday, the Friends of Historic Nacogdoches unveiled the statue of pioneering black educator E.J. Campbell on the grounds of Thomas J. Rusk Elementary School and the Old University building. The statue shows Campbell kneeling – significant I think – next to a student seated at a desk, and Campbell is showing the student a globe of the world.

I don't know anyone who more consistently gives and serves sacrificially in our society, than public school teachers and EJ Campbell was a model for our entire community. He was a witness.

We lost one of our best public school teachers this week when Jody Franks died from aggressive brain cancer. Jody made a witness to the way of servanthood and the Way of Jesus. She loved to teach, she loved her students in Nacogdoches High School in the AP Biology and the STEM program, and they loved her. Before teaching in Nacogdoches and East Texas, Jody served in the AmeriCorps in Sitka, Alaska and then served in the Peace Corps in the Republic of Georgia. Jody loved nature, loved to learn, and was devoted to helping her student love to learn. She exemplified, she witnessed to the Way of Jesus that there is another way in this world that is not domination and power, that refuses violence and coercion, and instead serves and gives and shares.



Jody knew and certainly knows now, the rest of the story – that in the resurrection, God raised the crucified Jesus Christ to be alive with God forevermore. The Powers-that-Be did not prevail. The way of domination and control will lose. The disciples, repented, and returned to follow him. God confirmed that God's Way was and is the Way of Jesus – suffering servanthood, justice, peace, reconciliation.

The story tells us that in one way or another, the disciples took up the cross; tradition says some died by it. And the faith declares that all the faithful disciples live by it. What was seen as chief obstacle to God's Way -- the cross -- became the Way of God's beloved community. Jesus's Way prevails.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.