

“Déjà Vu All Over Again”
Mark 10:35-45
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As many of you know, ministers have four to five themes we care about most and thus no matter how disciplined we are about trying to weave other concerns into church life, these themes appear regularly. It's one reason why really long pastorates - I know one that lasted nearly fifty years – may not be a good idea. Over time all churches need more concerns addressed than any one minister is likely to address very well.

But ministers are not the only parties to have favorite themes. Churches have them. We like to talk about our children's, youth and music ministries as well as specific mission endeavors and services like the Clothing Ministry, Toy Joy and Hanging of the Greens. Biblical writers have favorite themes. Luke is always talking about justice concerns, John uses his “I am” sayings and double entendres, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, while Mark tells a fast-paced story about the good news of the kingdom, but they are all talking about Jesus.

And speaking of Jesus, he has a few themes he just can't seem to let go of – reaching out to the marginalized, practicing forgiveness, going beyond the letter of the law, avoiding hypocrisy. So, maybe it's “O.K.” to get stuck, as long as we are stuck on the right things, like the love of God and neighbor, God's concern for the whole world and all the people in it, accepting grace and following Jesus.

I say all of this today because the passage we have read from Mark sounds familiar to people who have been in worship this fall. We have not read the whole story each time, but this is the third time we have encountered this story. Three times Jesus predicts his suffering and death, three times his closest friends and followers refuse to believe what he is saying, three times he insists that not only is this his path, it is the path his disciples will follow. It is déjà vu all over again! It's like going to Disney World and hearing “It's a Small World” on the ride, in our head the rest of the day and now too since I have mentioned it!

And yet, as we have noted, maybe it's "O.K." to get stuck. Maybe this story is repeated three times, with slight variations, for a reason; that is, it is not the product of poor editing. Maybe there are details in this story which bear repeating.

For one thing, we find encouragement in the limited capacities of the disciples. This may sound odd at first, perhaps even unkind or lazy. But the point is not just that the disciples are a bunch of dimwits who can make us feel better about our inadequacies. Misery does love not just company but equally miserable company. So, if we fall down badly on the calling to follow Jesus, the fact that his first disciples do too might make us feel better. But the point here is that God uses these first disciples to build the church which means God can use us too.

To be clear, as we have noted when we have encountered this story before, the disciples are amazingly, shall we say, "spirited" instead of stubborn or bullheaded. Jesus tells them repeatedly just what kind of Messiah he is, not a political leader who will deliver the people from Roman oppression, as worthy as this cause might be, but a suffering servant, in the image presented by the prophet Isaiah in today's reading and elsewhere, who will lay down his life for his friends. He could not make it any clearer and yet every time they say, "Nope, not going to happen," and then proceed to do something remarkably inappropriate like argue about who gets to sit in the important seats next to Jesus.

The only accurate way to describe these disciples is to use words we teach our children not to use because they are demeaning, and there are many children present here today. So, let's just say that they are a little slow to get the point Jesus is making, but this is actually good news for us, because we can all be a little slow at times, and the fact that Jesus has chosen these disciples, knowing who they are, and continues to use them, after they confirm who they are, is hopeful for us.

I think of a time years ago when a friend was preaching at an associational meeting in Virginia. It was at a small rural church which happened to be across the street from a high school and while the friend preached on a passage from Joshua or Judges, some story about a band of God's people taking an enemy city, a marching band practiced across

the street. Unfortunately, the preacher never realized what the competing sound was and experienced it only as an irritant. He missed an opportunity to reference the band and weave it into the story.

But how often do we miss some obvious reference to weave into a sermon or lesson or some obvious message that might speak to a pressing need or social concern? How often does the church in this time, like all others, miss the obvious thing Jesus would have us to do?

Scripture tells us we are all part of one body - male and female, slave and free, Jew and Greek – but we continue to put down women, people of color and outsiders. Jesus tells us that when we welcome the stranger in our land, we welcome him and end up on the right side of judgment, but evangelicals in this land continue to do everything in their power to demonize and exclude immigrants. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as our self, to forgive those who do us harm, to love even our enemy, but we make one excuse after another for why this really doesn't apply to our specific situation.

We are just like the clueless preacher, we are just like the first disciples, but God uses them in mighty ways. So, there is hope for us in this story, even if it is an odd hope.

But there is more in this *déjà vu* experience than the disciples' example; there is further clarity about Jesus' identity and purpose. As we have noted, this is the third time Jesus underscores for his disciples just what kind of Messiah he is, a suffering servant who lays down life for others. The reading from Hebrews combines with the reading from Isaiah to open up an even more specific interpretation of his suffering and death, especially if we link these texts to Jesus' own reference in Mark to giving his life as a ransom for many.

What we are talking about is atonement, the idea that Jesus' death on a cross provides forgiveness for our sins, as the animals sacrificed in Leviticus 16 are viewed to provide forgiveness for the nation of Israel as Jewish people recognize to this day on Yom Kippur. There is no need to get stuck in the weeds here, but it is important to point out the weeds.

The concept of ransom assumes payment to some party on behalf of those held hostage, here either the Devil or God, both of which are

problematic. God doesn't need to be bought off nor does God need to buy off the Devil. It is important to note that the term "ransom" appears only here and in the parallel text in Matthew (20:28) in the New Testament. So, we might not want to hinge our entire understanding of what is accomplished in Jesus' death on one word in one verse.

There is no question about the fact that Jesus' death is central to Christian faith. His life and resurrection matter too, in addition to the claim of incarnation, but his death is central to our faith. Part of the message has to do with God's companionship in suffering. When we wonder if God cares or even knows about any hardship we face, we need only remember that a part of God's own self endures the suffering of a cross. God knows and cares.

But another part of the message concerns forgiveness. We need not buy into any specific atonement theory, all of which are just that, theories, in order to embrace the idea that somehow, in ways we may never fully understand, through the cross, God extends forgiveness to us. God does not take us back from evil through force. God lays down life for us. God in Christ suffers for us. This is the message of the cross, this is how God works, this is who Jesus is.

It is not the most obvious way for a Messiah to work. Writing to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul says the cross is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). The very idea of a Messiah who lays down life is laughable which is why we struggle with the concept to this day.

In his book *Practice Resurrection* Eugene Peterson says that because of its discomfort with the way of the cross, American Christianity has tried to cross-fertilize American with Christian in order to produce a more resilient hybrid form of religion. He notes that in botany and animal husbandry, grafting and cross-breeding are practiced to produce stronger species, but adds that if you don't know what you are doing, you end up with something worse.

This is what he sees in much American Christianity where both the image of God and the crucified Savior are lost and we end up with what he calls a mongrel spirituality. He is talking about triumphal Christianity, the prosperity gospel and all other forms of our faith which

guarantee health, wealth and success; attempt to conquer by force; and lose the cross in the process. Make no mistake, these approaches are popular. They just aren't connected to Jesus and the way he works.

But there is one other takeaway from this story – this way of the cross isn't just for Jesus, it is for all who follow him. In the reading from Mark, we join the story right after Jesus has predicted his suffering and death for the third time. James and John immediately tell Jesus they want him to do whatever they ask. It is a bizarre way to approach a teacher under any circumstance. “Give us what we want!” they say to which Jesus replies quite graciously, “And what might that be?”

“We want to sit at your right and left in your glory,” Zebedee's boys say with remarkable confidence, thus demanding places of importance right after Jesus says he will suffer and die. “You don't know what you are asking for,” Jesus says, “Are you ready for my baptism? Are you ready to drink my cup?” He is not talking about what we do in the water here nor is he talking about communion. He is talking about the full Jesus experience – suffering, ridicule, pain and death. That is his glory, that is his baptism, that is his cup.

They still don't get it, nor do the other disciples who are offended that James and John might have gotten dibs on front row seats, so Jesus tells them one more time that what matters among his followers is a willingness to serve, to lay down life as he does.

We have been here before this fall. It is a repeated message in the Jesus story, but it bears repeating because it is so difficult to hear and because it is so important, so central and basic to our faith.

It's a bit like the fundamentals of any sport – dribbling, passing, shooting and using your feet on defense in basketball; blocking, tackling, holding onto the ball, staying in your gap in football. Fans get excited about flashy things – dunks and blocks, long passes and runs – but the game is won with fundamentals, in the trenches, with the basics. There is a parallel in other endeavors like dance, but since my fundamentals there are so minimal, I don't feel qualified to comment. But Christian faith is grounded in certain basic fundamentals, things like grace and love, sacrifice and service, laying down life for friends.

This reality is symbolized by the most significant leadership role in a Baptist church, a role we are voting on this month, the role of deacon. Baptist churches in this culture have created confusion by borrowing language from corporate America and speaking of a board of deacons, even viewing the role as administrative. This provides an example of the kind of misguided cross-fertilizing Eugene Peterson writes about.

The word “deacon” means *servant*. Its etymology is linked to waiting on tables, shuffling feet through the dust while performing a necessary task. The first deacons looked after orphans and widows, the most vulnerable then, so that the Apostles had time to preach and teach.

But rather than suggesting that the role is trivial, as it might be perceived in many parts of our culture, all of this simply elevates its status in the church. A deacon is not a board member. A deacon is a servant leader, a spiritual guide, a table waiter, and there is nothing more Christ-like we can be or do. We follow the one who came not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

Lest we think we’ve got this and are ready to move on, we might recall that last conversation Jesus has with Peter in the Gospel According to John (21:15-19). Standing on the shore of Lake Galilee after breakfast, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him more than the others. Peter says yes and Jesus tells him to feed his lambs. Jesus asks the question a second time, Peter gives the same reply and Jesus tells him to tend his sheep. Then, Jesus asks Peter a third time and Peter is hurt because he asks again, doesn’t he trust him by now? Well, he did deny even knowing Jesus... Anyway, Jesus tells him one more time to feed his sheep, predicts the manner of Peter’s death, and closes by saying, “Follow me.” And Peter does.

But how many times does Jesus have to tell Peter? It is déjà vu all over again, which means we are in good company today.