

“Claiming Our Zebedee DNA”
Mark 10:35–45
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I have vivid memories of being embarrassed as a child by characters on television shows who were constantly stumbling over themselves. I don't even remember all the characters' names, though Barney Fife on *Mayberry R.F.D.* stands out, but there were characters on *The Carol Burnette Show* and similar broadcasts that you just knew were going to make fools of themselves again and again. It was a part of a formula dating back to Shakespeare designed to provide comic relief. But I would get embarrassed for these poor bumbling souls.

We have to feel a bit like this for the disciples by this time in Mark's telling of the gospel. Just before our reading today, Jesus has predicted his suffering and death for a third time, and just like the first two times he did, the disciples display a level of oblivious self-absorption that is almost unbelievable. Jesus talks about his death, they want to know who gets to be the line leader, for the third time! For those of us born before a certain year, I would say the needle seems to be stuck... For younger folks, I would say it's a short video loop. Surely this does not happen three separate times... but it does.

This time, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approach Jesus, and apparently realizing the inappropriateness of their request, try to get Jesus to agree to it before they make it. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” It's like when people say to us, “Can you do me a favor?” without saying what it is, only worse. This sounds like more of a demand than a request, but Jesus doesn't bite. “What is it you want me to do for you?” he says, and they reply, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory?” No wonder they don't spell it out before trying to get a commitment from Jesus!

He tells them they don't know what they are asking, though if they had been listening to him, they would have had some idea. Can they drink from his cup, not just the cup of communion, but the cup of

suffering love? Can they embrace his baptism, meaning not just in water but into this way of life that leads to a cross? That's what his "glory" is. It's not his to grant who sits where, he says, but they will experience these things. They will suffer like him. It brings a whole new level of meaning to the admonition, "Be careful what you ask for."

But lest we think the sons of Zebedee are the only ones so oblivious to what Jesus is trying to teach them, when the other disciples hear about this conversation, they become angry with James and John, ostensibly because they want important places in glory too. This prompts Jesus to launch into a broader message about how things are to be done among his followers.

The Gentiles think leadership is about lording it over others, greatness is equated with tyranny – the cruel, unnecessary, and arbitrary use of power. It must not be so among you, Jesus says; among my followers, in the church, whoever wishes to become great 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 as a ransom for many.

Jesus begins by talking about his path of humble service and sacrificial love. He then says his followers will pursue this very same path and thus not be driven by selfish concerns. Finally, he says that leaders in his community will be exemplars of this principle, not those who seek to establish power over others but those who serve alongside others. It is a different way of proceeding in Jesus' time and ours.

It is easy to see the foolishness of the disciples, but perhaps not quite as easy to see our own foolishness, but we are not that different from them. As someone has said, we all have Zebedee DNA! We all at times miss the point of what Jesus is saying, and we all seek recognition and status in some ways whether we acknowledge this or not. But leaders in particular today seem to have this problem in abundance.

John Calvin said this narrative in Mark contains "a bright mirror of human vanity (because) it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition, or some other vice of the flesh, so that they who follow Christ have a different object in view from what they ought to have (*Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:417)."

A different view, as in of themselves rather than of others or Christ. All genuine leaders care more about others than themselves, but in the church, there is a special calling to put others first, even when this means being different from the world around us.

But this applies to all of us, not just leaders. Jesus envisions a different path for the church, a path where service and love, kindness and sensitivity shape our shared life. This is an uphill battle in a culture that is predominately self-interested and often inconsiderate of others. It takes intentionality and constant reminders to keep us on the path.

In the church I served in Louisville, Kentucky, there was an older man who recognized this. There was a sharp exchange at a church conference in which one man who was new to the church directed angry words at a person who expressed different views. No one addressed this in the meeting, but afterward, this older man approached the new member and said, “I don’t know how things were done in your previous church, but at Broadway we don’t treat each other that way. We express different views, but we don’t attack each other, we are kind to each other.” It was a wonderful response, offered in just the right spirit.

In addition to reminders, though, it helps if we see examples of how we are called to live. There are many of these in the life of this church, but I remember especially a practice from our early years here when the RAs were encouraged to take peoples’ dirty plates and glasses to the kitchen after people finished eating on Wednesday nights. It offered practical help and it provided a visible example of humble service, how we are called to live in the church.

Like the first disciples, we often act in embarrassing ways, we have some Zebedee DNA, but as Jesus redirects their energy, he points us in the right direction, toward a path of service and love.

Yet there may be another way to read this story, one that allows for a more sympathetic view of the disciples. Homiletics professor Charles Cambell notes that just before our reading begins, Mark says, “They were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid (Mark 10:32).” They were afraid.

Perhaps Jesus' ominous predictions of his passion have become clear to them, Campbell suggests, perhaps they understand what lies ahead. Perhaps in their fear, they seek the promise of a secure future. James and John may not just be power hungry; they may be acting on their fears (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p. 191).

We understand the emotion, as we do the consequence of seeking security. We have this DNA as well. Consider the national response to 9-11. A real threat led to deep fear which, in turn, led to all sorts of security responses, some more helpful than others. Heightened communication between intelligence agencies has made us safer while profiling threats on the basis of race and religion has not. Consider the state of the church in our culture. Declining numbers have led to existential fears for the future which, in turn, have led to an array of responses, again some more helpful than others. Creative ministry aimed at addressing needs and connecting with people has enhanced the church's witness while fearful obsession with numbers has not.

Fear is a natural human response to a real or perceived threat. It drives a lot of the anti-immigrant sentiment in segments of our nation that is being exploited for political advantage. As we move closer to an inevitable demographic reality where no one group is a clear majority, the group that has been a majority, us, white people, especially white men, feel threatened and seek to secure our future with some move of power. But as the disciples' way of addressing their fear is neither productive nor what Jesus wants, our search for security is often lacking.

Yet Jesus may be offering a helpful redirection for the disciples and us. Charles Campbell says Jesus' words about drinking from his cup and experiencing his baptism may be more than a threat that they will suffer and die for their faith like him (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, pp. 192-193). He may be saying, "You will not always be driven by your fears and need for security. You will be empowered to take up your cross and follow me. You will remain faithful to the end."

It is an amazing promise for the first disciples and us. We need not live in fear. We need not be held captive by our yearning for security. There is an alternative to the path of seeking power and security as if our lives depend on it. It is the way of the cross. And this way shapes not

just our individual lives but our shared life in the church, as we seek to separate ourselves from the world around us, from what theologian Walter Wink called the Domination System (*Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, pp. 33-104).

The term may be new to some of us, but the principles are not. This kind of system is characterized by power over others, control of others, hierarchies of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed. We see this system at work in many businesses and organizations. We see it at work in many nations around the world and in the desire of some people for this nation. We even see it at work in some churches that are very authoritarian, and it is easy to see how fear can lead to a desire to batten down the hatches. A more open system can be difficult to manage.

Baptists, of all people, know this. It has been said that wherever there are three or four Episcopalians, there is always a fifth... Well, wherever there are three or four Baptists, there are at least ten opinions on any subject. We don't always agree with ourselves, much less each other, and this means church life in a context where freedom of conscience and democratic polity are central can be messy.

But what is the alternative? Centralized power, someone decides for us, we give up voice? It's not very Baptist, it's not very American, and it's not very Christlike. Jesus models the way of serving with others; power alongside instead of over; freedom, not control. In John 8:31-32, he says, "If you continue in my word and are my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Freedom is the goal, not control. Christ comes to set us free. The Son of Man comes to ransom us from the Domination System so that we might follow him in the pursuit of a different path.

We may have a lot of Zebedee DNA — in terms of the yearning for recognition and status, and the fear that leads to a search for unhealthy forms of security — but Christ can still work with us, Christ can direct us to a different path, a far better path of service and love.