

Sunday March 5  
Lesson 1: Sharing in Jesus' Cup  
Scripture: Matthew 20: 20-28

**Context:**

Today we start our spring curriculum, "The Life of Faith." In the first unit, "The Journey to the Cross," we will reflect on the season of Lent and examine the ministry of Jesus before his final acts of ministry in Jerusalem. Today's lesson focuses on time Jesus spent with his disciples and his call to them to become servants as they approached the city of Jerusalem. The focus of the lesson will be to commit ourselves, just as Jesus exemplified, to a life of servanthood.

In most of the gospels, there is what is called "the turn to Jerusalem." This term refers to Jesus and his disciples making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. Usually, this turn is predicated by Jesus predicting his impending arrest and trial, suffering, crucifixion, and death. The event always causes those following him to respond in various ways, from denial to what we might call "last minute politicking." All the exchanges point to the sacrificial nature of what Jesus comes to do and how others miss the point.

Today's passage is known as one of the passages to prepare the disciples for Jesus' death. Jesus announces his plan to die as the third and climatic passion announcement, reinforcing the participation of Jesus in obediently going to his death as God's will.<sup>1</sup> Yet the event does not necessarily lead his disciples to a state of mourning. While the gospel of Mark contains the Zebedee brothers asking for positions in the ascension, Matthew introduces their mother as the instigator for her sons rising to the top.

Jesus does not condemn Mrs. Zebedee or her sons. Instead, he asks if they are willing to pay the price for such "glory." Following a well-established Jewish tradition, Jesus speaks of his anticipated passion as a cup that he must drink, just as the prophets speak of the cup of God's wrath.<sup>2</sup> The brothers insist they are ready, with Jesus giving a polite response of how they will indeed drink of his cup, and yet their seats are not his to give away.

Of course, the encounter leads to the other disciples getting upset at this jockeying for power. The ire of the ten provides an occasion for Jesus to talk about a new kind of community Jesus is establishing, where the only valid ambition should be to serve as faithfully as possible.<sup>3</sup> While the pagan world emphasizes greatness and lording over others, Jesus is more interested in how his disciples serve those around him.

The word "serve" here has several connotations in Greek. The one used here is *diakoneo*, which means to "provide a personal service," especially "serve food or drink."<sup>4</sup> This is the life

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R.A. "Matthew." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 232.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Jesus asks his disciples to provide. For he will show them what it means as he will be the one to serve by giving his life as a ransom for many.

### **Application**

The season of Lent has historically been a time of reflection in the Christian tradition. We look at the words Jesus said before his imminent death and reflect on them. We ask the question: do we truly follow Jesus? Hopefully, we dive deeper into the call God places on our lives and seek to integrate his words in our daily patterns.

The passage of Jesus and the arguing of the disciples over who shall be greatest is a prime example of how humanity always misses the point of true life and following Jesus. When Jesus speaks of his death, resurrection, and ascension, the next move is a jockey of power from the disciples. Even when Jesus warns of what it will be like to drink of his cup, the disciples jump up for the chance for glory. Jesus foreshadows their own deaths by saying they will drink from his cup and then goes on to say how not even he will pick who sits at the right or left of him. He goes on to tell his disciples what he expects of them is servanthood, a radical concept in his day and time.

As I read this passage, my heart was warmed when I thought of the concepts of servanthood, humility, and seeking goodness over greatness. These very concepts reminded me of the many conversations I had with my father who served over twenty-eight years as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. Today marks nine years since he died on Ash Wednesday 2014 in a car accident on his way home after running. In some senses, it does seem like nine years and in other ways it seems not so long ago he was with us still.

While reading of what Jesus spoke to his disciples on being a servant and not seeking glory, I remembered several conversations my dad had with me, particularly on trips to Auburn football games. In those trips between our home in Tallahassee or Montgomery, we of course would discuss the prospects of the Auburn tigers. Yet our conversations inevitably circled around back to ministry as I had discerned the call and had both questions and sought counsel on how to proceed further.

In many ways, I had grown up watching the pastoral arts being lived by with my father. I knew the importance of being in the community, giving pastoral care, and leading in corporate worship. I had discovered my own love of teaching the scriptures and the joy of leading in worship. Things were coming together, and the Holy Spirit was nudging me to respond to my call and serve the church with my gifts.

Yet my Dad also knew the shadow side of ministry, the places sometimes even the local church does not see. In those car rides, he would often talk about the roles of clergy and how ministry was not for ambition or political gain. He had seen pastors seek appointments, not based on what the church could do for the community, but for what they could earn or the prestige they could gain for themselves. Never one to publicly dismiss or attack others, he gave words of counsel to his son to seek to be a servant. While we cannot control what other people do or how they act, we can only hold ourselves accountable to the Lord. For my father, ministry was never to be about seeking glory or holding power over others. According to him, we are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, trusting him to do the work and us be the conduits. His words were faithful and true, manifested in his own life and obedience.

Recently, a colleague and I lamented how the attitude of my father seems to be missing in today's church. Dad went where he was sent and loved being a servant. He was faithful to his ordination vows and loyal to the United Methodist Church. He was also so incredibly discerning

of people and their motivations, seeing people in their truest forms and what truly drove them. The people he encouraged me to look to in ministry as colleagues have indeed shown faithfulness and fidelity to the Lord and the United Methodist Church; whereas the people he counseled me to avoid have led churches into division and strife for their own glory. As I look at his picture on my office desk, I give thanks for the one who showed me the true power of servanthood and goodness.

In this season of Lent, Jesus invites us to ask if we serve him and others, or if we seek our own glory and power. He does not promise us servanthood will be easy or always fun. He does promise us as we lose our lives in him, we gain our souls. He transforms us and we are given meaning and purpose in this world.

How do you seek servanthood and following Jesus? Who are people who show you what it means to be a servant? Why is it so easy to focus on our own glory or quest for power? Who are people who hold you accountable to have a servant's heart? Why do you think Jesus wants us to focus on servanthood? What does this look like in your vocation, your church, and your community?

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