

Before I went to seminary I taught middle school and high school, as I know some of you do or did before you retired. So some of you have had the experience of handing out an assignment with directions clearly printed at the top, verbally reviewing those directions with the class, and then calling on a student who inevitably asks if they are supposed to do the exact opposite of what your printed and verbal directions told them to do. Jesus was a teacher in this sense as well; the gospels are mostly just the story of Jesus spending three years teaching his disciples, the disciples missing the point, then Jesus trying to get them to stop doing the exact opposite of what he has taught them to do.

Four verses before our gospel passage for today, Jesus tells the disciples that the first will be last and the last will be first. Then he tells them that when they get to Jerusalem, the chief priests and scribes will hand him over to be mocked, beaten, and killed. And immediately James and John say, “Cool. So, when you sit on your throne in glory, can you give us the two most important places beside you?” And lest we think that they were the only two who missed the point, the rest of the disciples get angry with them, presumably because they thought to ask him first. Though Mark doesn’t hint at his tone, Jesus seems to calmly and patiently repeat himself, yet again: *Earthly rulers lord it over their people; that’s not how it’s going to work for you. Whoever wants to be the first and greatest must be a servant to everyone.*

We probably should not blame James and John for getting it wrong, or at least we should acknowledge that they aren’t the only ones. The whole of scripture paints for us a picture of God showing the people a still more excellent way of love, justice, mercy, kindness, cooperation, compassion, and charity, while the people time and time again try to apply human values and methods to God. God frees the people from Pharaoh’s oppression in Egypt; almost as soon as God gives them the Law for self-governance, they demand to be ruled by a king—who of course oppresses them. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans all conquered Israel with military force and ruled through political power; so the people expected God to act through human methods, to send a messiah who would gain power through military force and become a political powerhouse. James and John recognized that they were part of a revolution, so as members of Jesus’ inner circle, they were anticipating getting good positions once the Jesus Administration took over. They just didn’t realize it wasn’t that kind of revolution. Jesus wasn’t going to be a military hero, a politically savvy leader, or an iron-fisted ruler; *he came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* That is not human leader talk: Can you imagine the president—any president—giving

himself as a ransom for many, say bargaining with a foreign government to trade himself for the release of prisoners of war? That's not what the leaders of our human institutions do.

Now, we might think that with James and John as examples, with the whole of scripture as an example, that when the Christian Church got up and running it would embrace this servant leadership that Jesus taught—this totally counter-cultural way of living and leading. But no. Mostly the Church throughout the ages has behaved like any other human institution, just with Jesus as its mascot. The first Christians suffered as an oppressed minority only until they became a legally protected majority and started oppressing others. The Church that began in people's homes soon started building basilicas and cathedrals—palaces to enthrone the one who said, “my kingdom is not of this world.” The Crusaders fought wars to claim ownership of the Holy Land for the one who said, “wherever two or three are gathered, I'm there with them.” As Christianity began splitting into factions and official denominations, the Church started burning people at the stake, justifying themselves by naming the victims *heretics*, *witches*, *Jews*—all in the name of the Jew who said, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Maybe the best definition of “taking the Lord's name in vain” is not what we mutter when we stub a toe but what we do in the name of Jesus that Jesus himself would never do.

By this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has already taught the disciples that following him is not about who gets the best seats at the table; it's about committing to a completely different way of thinking and living, even when the consequence of doing so means having to take up a cross like Jesus did. It's beyond disrespectful of the real persecution of Christians throughout the ages when people in this country, where we are guaranteed the free practice of religion, complain that Christians are persecuted when what they really mean is that Christians don't enjoy legal privilege over others. But even if it's a matter of not understanding the difference between being persecuted and simply not being privileged, any Christian who complains about persecution, who is surprised that Christianity requires some kind of sacrifice, has totally missed the point of Jesus' life and death. Jesus did not come to be the winner of human games, the victor of human wars, or the ruler of human empires. He came to teach us to stop playing human games, to stop fighting human wars, and to stop investing in human empires. James and John didn't get the places on Jesus' right and left; those places were taken by two criminals on crosses when the glory of God was revealed in ultimate sacrifice and selfless service to others.

Discipleship is hard because everything around us teaches us not to love, not to serve, not to show mercy, not to pursue the justice to which God calls us. That's how the world works. Yet Jesus says, “But it is not so among you.” What a challenge, but also, what a gift.