Holding On And Letting Go

Mark 10:35-45 Kimby Young

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Have you ever noticed – frequently in the Bible – the disciples are idiots. I call this buffoon theology. Usually, they just ask stupid questions. But sometimes it goes a step further. Time and again, the disciples do not understand what is happening. They blunder in where they shouldn’t or don’t go where they should. They make mistakes – sometimes huge mistakes – like denying Jesus or running away or hiding. But really, who wouldn’t be confused. Jesus never did the expected thing. The disciples didn’t know the resurrection was coming, so how could they possibly anticipate the right actions. Even with our knowledge today, we make the wrong assumptions and take the wrong actions. Sometimes, though, I think the writers of the gospels made the disciples look worse than they really were – like today’s scripture. Mark frequently has the disciples bumbling around asking silly questions. But I think they did it for a reason – the buffoon theology I was talking about. The gospel writers sometimes emphasized the mistakes in order to point toward the true discipleship. The disciples made fun of themselves in order to help future followers to be more faithful and to make better decisions. Or they asked crazy questions so that Jesus could reveal some greater truth and inspiration.

Take today’s gospel lesson. James and John ask for special status in the new kingdom Jesus is establishing. In another gospel it is their mother who does the asking, wanting the best for her sons. This leads to the other disciples becoming indignant and arguing amongst themselves. Who is better? Who deserves the best? Clearly they are imagining power and glory – not the service and persecution that was to come, not the self sacrifice and suffering that Jesus endured. Clearly they did not understand. This should not be surprising because God’s plan in Jesus Christ was not the obvious one. Jesus’ power was not the power of this world. Jesus’ power was in giving that power away – a truly unexpected way of living in our world. The disciples had seen it in the healing and feeding and loving that Jesus lived. But they still didn’t understand. It wasn’t about popularity. Jesus love was about purpose – pointing other people toward God and helping people to experience God’s grace. So again, it is not surprising that the disciples didn’t understand what was coming, what Jesus was about to do to show God’s love in the world. It wasn’t logical – to be sacrificial. It wasn’t typical to get ahead by giving away. Jesus was trying to show them how to live. Jesus was trying to show them how to gain what was most important – that is the grace of a loving God.

Jesus said, you know how most people exercise power. They rule by Lording it over others. By putting other people down. By trying to control or manipulate. By showing off and acting out. Even by lying or scheming or deceiving to keep power. But Jesus says, disciples are called to a different kind of leadership – in fact to a leadership that is following. Following Jesus. Following God’s will. It is not about our power but about God’s power. It is not about our will but about God’s purpose. We must in fact sacrifice what we want for what God wants. We must sacrifice what we want for what is good for others. Put God first. Put others before ourselves. Put the benefit of others before what helps ourselves. As Jesus says, be a servant for others. Be a slave for God – doing what God wants at all times and in all choices. The example is Jesus who gave his life for all.

Again, the disciples didn’t know what was about to happen. They didn’t know that Jesus was about to die on a cross, to sacrifice so that God’s true power could be shown in resurrection. God’s power over sin, over suffering, over death. The disciples didn’t understand – at least not when Jesus spoke to them in today’s lesson. Do we understand Jesus Christ’s call for us today? What does it mean for us to be a servant for others? What does it mean to be a slave to God’s will? – to do what God wants, not what benefits self? We set aside our own desires to do what God wants us to do. We are self less. We act in love.

I’m going to let you wrestle with what that means for you personally. What desire of my own do I need to set aside, in order to put God first? That’s really what the spiritual discipline of “giving something up” for Lent is all about. What desire of my own do I need to set aside, in order to put God first? It’s not about the chocolate or the alcohol or the swear words. It’s about the desires of our hearts. And trying to match our heart’s desire to God’s heart. I invite you to think in the weeks ahead about that selflessness to which you are called. What does it mean for you to follow Jesus in the way of love? It is a very personal journey as you seek to answer God’s call for you.

Instead today, I want to think about our call together – as a church serving Jesus Christ. How is God calling us to sacrifice and to serve? Because your leadership is wrestling with that question. Your session, your deacons, your staff, your active volunteers are trying to discern God’s call for us today. We understand that leadership is about following. We understand that we are called to service, even to sacrifice, in order to do what God would have us do. But we also understand that it is not just the leadership – it is every single person who seeks to follow Jesus – every single one of us is called to set aside our own desires and to put God first. We are even called to set aside what we want in order to help others. I think that we understand that in our minds and occasionally in our hearts. We want what is best for others.

James and John did too. And their mother. And Peter and the other disciples. They wanted to improve the world and help their neighbors. They wanted to make a better life for everyone. They were all in. They had spent 3 years following Jesus around and learning what love looks like. They were sincere good hard working people. They tried to do their best. But they still had their own desires and wants, ambitions and hopes. Jesus tried to help them see that prioritizing self would not lead them where they wanted to go. It would always leave them empty and wanting more. Putting God first would allow them to be filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized in grace, as Jesus said. Only when we allow God’s Spirit to fill us up will we be truly satisfied.

Here in this congregation we are sometimes selfish. I don’t mean to be critical. It is human. It is natural to want what we want when we want it. It is human to want things my own way – the familiar, the comfortable, the music I like, the worship I prefer, the mission I find easy, the study that satisfies me or even makes me comfortable, the action that makes me feel good about myself. It is human. It is natural. I like things the way I like it.

The problem is sometimes the way I like it - isn’t serving God. It isn’t bringing new people to God. It isn’t pointing the way to God. It isn’t loving. It isn’t Jesus centered. It is self centered. Sometimes – not always but sometimes – what I like may not be what is right. We are struggling with that as a church. We want to please people. We want to make people happy. We want to satisfy people. What we should want is to please, satisfy and make God happy? What desires do we need to set aside in order to find God’s will, in order to follow Jesus?

This is what your session has been struggling with for several years, what I have been struggling with. Today, in the year ahead, we invite you into that struggle of seeking God’s will. How are we called to follow Jesus in the way of love? What will that mean for our future together? We are mostly happy, mostly taking care of each other. We could do better. We could do worse. But the real question is not how will this church serve our needs in the years ahead. The real question is how will this church serve God’s purpose? How will we share Christ’s love in the world? How will we love as Jesus loves? And what do we need to change now so that we may serve God well and faithfully? I don’t think I have the answers. But I think you do, as you listen to Christ’s call and respond to God’s grace. As you individually think about the gifts you share and the sacrifices you are called to make. Notice in the scripture Jesus says, “What do you want me to do for you?” That’s really the wrong question. Or the right question but we should be asking Jesus, not the other way around. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus, we should ask - What do you want us to do for God? Together we can figure it out. Together let us love as Jesus loved, to the glory of God. Amen.