

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Wrongheaded Discipleship

Mark 10.

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Well, I have some good news and some bad news – which do you want first? I’ll go ahead and give you the bad news, and I’ll save the good news for the end – for this place should be a Good News place, if it is anything. And it’s not that the bad news is all that “bad” as much as it is difficult. So here’s the bad news: we are wrongheaded disciples, but we seem to keep good company with those original disciples. The bad news is: we just don’t get it – we just don’t get what it means to really follow Jesus – and again we keep pretty good company given that those first disciples just didn’t get it either. And they were hand-picked by Jesus himself. Or maybe the worst news of all is that we do get it, but we choose – either consciously or unconsciously – to not follow what we know to be The Way. I’ve spent about 6 out of the last 9 summers preaching for a week or two at various youth camps. The first camp had about 300 youth there. That camp gave my name to another camp, and I was invited to Caswell to preach to 1000 youth for two weeks. Intimidating to say the least. At Caswell, at the end of the week, the adult chaperones had the opportunity to give feedback about the proclaimer – which is a nice way to say that they were given pieces of paper on which to “evaluate” the preaching. While I did receive positive comments, it’s only the negative ones that I remember. (Isn’t that always the way it is?) In one sermon I called the disciples “dumb.” This really set-off one of the chaperones, and he really let me have it in the evaluation. “How could she be so irreverent and heretical as to say anything disparaging about the disciples?” “What

kind of example is she setting for the youth in speaking so negatively about those early faithful followers?" Well, Mr. Anonymous, I think I was simply reading the Bible. They were a motley crew – a disjointed band of folks who had probably been labeled “crazy” by the majority for leaving everything they had and everyone they knew to follow this radical, counter-cultural figure that had this unexplainable way about him. People were drawn to him – even if they kept a distance. Many were amazed by him and afraid of him in the same moment. And the small group that had really dedicated themselves to him and his Way were constantly simply not getting it. Jesus was making this fairly plain and simple (which is not the same thing as easy). He was having to repeat himself, and he was always finding different methods of teaching. Sometimes he was point blank lecturing, sometimes he told a story to bring home his point, sometimes he preached, sometimes he had to retreat and get some peace and quiet, and sometimes he let his actions speak for him. And after all of that – they simply and consistently didn't get it. It's mind-boggling, really. After the third time in a short span of time of letting them know that his death was surely imminent, all James and John could think about was who would be sitting to the right and left of Jesus in glory. After hearing all about the pain and suffering that Jesus would soon be facing and after hearing over and over about “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” philosophy, all James and John could think about was themselves in the great by-and-by. What Jesus said was (and is) so countercultural that I'm just not sure that it is possible for us to get it. I can just see Jesus now – slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand and shaking his head – sometimes in frustration, sometimes in disappointment, sometimes in utter sadness, sometimes, probably with a slight chuckle: “What I have done?” he must have asked himself. “I am leaving the

responsibility of carrying on this message and this ministry/mission with these guys? What was I thinking?!” he must have questioned. “These guys don’t get it. They really, fundamentally, don’t get it.” “If after being with me all this time they are still wondering who gets to sit on my right and my left in glory, then truly I say: Verily, verily, they don’t get it!”

The bad news is that I think we are exactly like those first wrong-headed disciples. “If Mark’s gospel were a movie, this scene would make the perfect trailer. Without entirely giving away the ending, it summarizes all the major themes of Mark’s gospel. In a nutshell, it offers everything that is quintessential Mark: the journey toward the cross, suffering and death, wrongheaded disciples, the reversal of power, and Jesus’ reflection upon the meaning of his mission. But I’m not sure there would be much of an audience for this movie after the preview; we can be as thick as the disciples when we fail to grasp how difficult and demanding the gospel can be. [We make this faith story so simple and warm and fuzzy. We really just want to feel good. That’s really the only kind of movie we want to see. We’re too tired, we’re too overwhelmed, we’re too self-centered and self-absorbed to see the real movie. We are so drawn to anything that’s about “me,” and as far as I can tell, the message of Jesus is about them – and us.]Mark’s gospel is an extended passion narrative In Jesus’ stark prediction we see a man come to terms with his fate. He is the only one who accepts the inevitability of his destiny. In Mark’s day, many objected to the notion of a vulnerable Christ; not much has changed since then. Who wants vulnerability, suffering and death when the economy is good and crime is down and the world has so much to offer? But for Mark, the guts of the gospel is this: we follow a suffering Christ, a crucified criminal . . . [Jesus has predicted

his own death three times but the disciples] ignore Jesus' prediction, and focus instead on their own desires for greatness. This is more remarkable in view of how adamant Jesus had been. He has twice said, 'The first shall be last.' He has already redirected the disciples concerning their desire for greatness, telling them that to save their lives they must lose them. He has told them they must become like children in order to enter the kingdom. And he has emphasized his own suffering and death three times. Yet the disciples still don't get it . . . Jesus reorders power structures among those who wish to follow him. He has been preaching and teaching and living this all along. Had James and John understood, they would never have asked to be at his right and left hand, places that would ultimately be taken by criminals on either side of Jesus' cross." (The Christian Century, "Mark: The Movie," Stacey Elizabeth Simpson, October 11, 2000, page 995)

We want to be at the right and left of Jesus in every way and in every place – except on either side of the cross.

The bad news is that we frolick along like those other wrongheaded disciples from so long ago – having the audacity to call ourselves Followers – Christian. It's not right, and we know it. Deep down inside, we know it, but we justify and we rationalize in order to take away some of the guilt. The truth is that I'm not courageous enough to really follow Jesus. Sometimes, I know I get it right and those are moments of real celebration. And then there are moments when I see others getting it right, and I simply can't go there. I'll tell you about my most recent experience with this. It was preaching at one of those summer youth camp experiences just this past summer. I stood on that stage at Mars Hill College – hot as fire in there. It was the last night. We had offered an opportunity for youth to come down front to share with their youth minister about

anything significant that had happened to them that week. Youth slowly came down. A few here. A few there. Our whole group came down to embrace Michael. That was a powerful moment for me – and for them and for him. But I couldn't take my eyes off of that front row. There stood Helms and Greg Jarrell from the Hyaets community. Three black boys stood beside them singing “Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary” – an overused praise chorus that normally turns me off more than it turns me on. Hyaets had sponsored these youth to come to camp for the week. In an ocean of white – they stood out as black specks on the sea. But they stood beside Greg and Helms – white in skin color – multiracial in their souls. They live among these guys and with these guys in a neighborhood that many are afraid to drive through, much less to live in. And the truth is, and we know it somewhere deep down within, that they get it in a way that we don't. And we rationalize and we become defensive and judgmental in an effort to salve our conscience. After the service was over, I made a bee-line to Helms and Greg. I had to say to them, “I recognize that you are a follower of Jesus. I just wanted you to know. I believe what you are doing is significant for the Kingdom of God.”

I look at James and John, and it is so clear how wrongheaded they were. Why is it not so clear when I look at myself? The text today calls for us to identify with James and John: What are we asking of Jesus out of a desire for self-centered greatness? And what are the ways that we are not getting it?

Well, that's the bad news. Please, before we go home feeling more guilty than when we arrived and leaving with only the take-home of being battered and bruised – what is the good news? “Despite the inappropriateness of their question, Jesus does not rebuke James and John . . . He accepts them as they are, but firmly points them in a new

direction . . . although the disciples are here depicted as slow learners, ambitious and selfish, they nevertheless continue to follow Jesus. Their relationship to him is imperfect, but it is also unbroken . . . The text does not excuse the disciples, but neither does it reject them. Rather, it invites readers to identify with the Twelve as the stumbling followers of Jesus, the shaky servants of the Lord . . . the text offers a jolting challenge to any simplistic, self-centered understanding of discipleship. Getting right with God by coming to Jesus is not simply a basic factor in an orderly life. Discipleship will mean more trouble, not less. Though it may be palliative in some respects, following Jesus is likely to be disruptive in others. True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, another member of the Christian fellowship who has unusual needs, or any person whose situation elicits neighborly service at personal cost. Jesus came to serve and to give his life. Anyone who contemplates following Jesus without fear and trembling has not understood true discipleship, according to Mark." (Interpretation, "Mark," Lamar Willaimson, Jr., pages 193-195)

The good news is: We may be wrong-headed, but we are here. We're here for various reasons: habit, desire, need for rest and renewal, guilt – whatever the reason – we are here. Every time we gather here it's an opportunity for one of those pulling aside moments where we hear the message again – hoping that maybe this time we will get it – or at least get another piece of it. Jesus expected so much of those wrongheaded disciples. And he accepted them. Period. Wrongheaded and all. May it be so for us as well.