



Meeting Jesus Again

WE NEED A SAVIOR...

Mark 10:35-45

January 30, 2022

Two Sundays ago, I began this sermon series with a simple statement. The answer is Jesus. In response, over the last couple of weeks, several of you have sent me pictures of highway billboards displaying precisely those words: *The answer is Jesus*. And you've also sent me other words on billboards. My favorite so far was the message directly borrowed from the successful campaign of America's dairy farmers several years ago. In the exact same font as that ad, the billboard asks the rhetorical question, "Got Jesus?" Of course, the most common message is even more direct. Two words again. *Jesus saves*.

The conviction that Jesus Christ is the answer, and the yearning for others to hear and know that truth as well, has been the animating force of the Christian movement since the very beginning. The passion and enthusiasm of the earliest followers of Jesus compelled them to share this message with anyone who would listen. Sometimes in the Church we call that work *evangelism*, a word lifted directly from the first verse of the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. The earliest of the four gospels is also the only one with a title. Mark says at the beginning of his work: *This is the beginning of the euangellion—evangelism*. It's a compound word in Greek. Two words in English translation. Good news. That's what those billboards and passionate disciples of Jesus want to share. Good news—*Jesus saves*.

Here's the thing that always complicates matters. The good news we share doesn't always sound or look so good. The path of faith we offer is not always straightforward or simple. The stories of scripture we read repeatedly remind us of this reality. At the outset, when Jesus first gathers his disciples, he is excruciatingly clear that there will be a cost to their

discipleship. Three times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gathers his followers specifically to tell them that he will face suffering, rejection, and death. It's important to note that the third of those three predictions comes *just before* the passage you just heard (Mark 10:35-45). And how do the disciples respond? They seem to miss the point entirely. Instead, brothers James and John change the subject. Jesus has just spoken of laying down his life, and they ask to be lifted up to places of authority and privilege. The disconnect between the two is so dramatic that we might wonder if the disciples were even listening to Jesus. I think they were.

Here's what I think. I think the disciples desperately want good news. And they want that good news to be about them, to be for them, to be on *their* terms. If this suffering Jesus describes in fact lies ahead, they want a guarantee of what happens after that. They want to know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, that the reward will be worth the effort. They want assurances of future power and glory. Because if not that, why go through this? If they have that, James and John are confident they can face anything. But they have to know. They have to know that a day will come when they will be seated at the right and left hand of the throne, a day will come when they will be secure and free, safe and powerful. Can you relate? Can you relate to their desperate need for a firm commitment that all will be well in the end, at least for them? Can you relate?

If you can relate, the response of Jesus will be entirely unsatisfying to you as it was to them. Vague promises of a shared cup and joint baptism. The cup of suffering. Baptism by fire. No guarantee of a prime spot in glory. *Where is the good news here?*

So, dissension and disagreement break out among the disciples. As they argue over the heavenly seating chart, Jesus gets their attention. He gets their attention by lifting their vision higher, by addressing the desire for prestige and authority, by contrasting the nature of human power and the *good news* that he has come to preach and live. In fact, they are polar opposites.

Like last week's lessons from the Sermon on the Mount, this teaching is radical, counter-cultural, and exceedingly difficult. But there it is, not just once but over and over again in the gospels. In the kingdom of God, greatness is measured by our ability to live as servants. In the kingdom of God, greatness is measured by service, even when that means suffering at the hands of those who wield power.

Jesus closes the encounter with the disciples with a kind of two-part summary statement. It speaks directly of the purpose of his life and the meaning of his death. The Son of Man came (1) to serve and (2) to give his life, a ransom for many.

An interesting thing happens when you begin to read and reflect on the interpretations of that single verse. The son of man came to serve and to give his life. This is the place where Jesus speaks most directly on the implications of his death, and so not surprisingly there has been much ink spilled on Mark 10:45. Here's what I've found.

Some interpreters focus all their attention on the first phrase. Jesus came to serve. His life is characterized by acts of sacrificial service. He calls all to follow him and live in this way as well. Jesus sets the example. In serving others we will discover our salvation. This reading and the implications for Christian living has much to recommend it. It clearly fits the context of the passage, where the disciples are seeking power and Jesus commands servanthood. The call to serve is a core component of Jesus' message throughout the gospels. And it is our call as well.

Maybe you know the name Robert Greenleaf. As Hoosiers, we should all be proud of this Terre Haute native who, in 1970, published a seminal essay. The

essay was titled: *The Servant Leader*. In the half-century since, his ideas have influenced generations of leaders in the nonprofit, corporate, and faith-based worlds, and the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership has become a force for the common good in every sector of society. Here's Greenleaf's thesis: Leaders who truly succeed are never those who look to expand their own authority but rather those who invest in serving others, who lift up those around them, who improve the lives of those in their communities. Greenleaf was a Quaker, and his ideas are deeply scriptural, particularly gospel-oriented. This morning's passage is a prime example. Jesus calls those who follow him to serve first. We are called to serve.

Other interpreters of this verse give passing mention of this reality but focus far more attention on that final phrase. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. In this reality, they assert, is our salvation—that Jesus not only set the example of servant leadership, he sacrificed his life for us. The language of ransom here declares that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ *does* something, that it secures a release, that it sets us free. It hearkens to the Old Testament understanding of God as liberator, God as deliverer, God as the one who frees us from captivity. So, many commentators and preachers rightly lift up this reference as a statement on the meaning of salvation. Jesus saves. The death of Jesus has set us free.

In my reading, I've been interested in the gravitational pull of each of these conclusions, and how this bifurcation might obscure the meaning of the passage in the same way our polarization leads us to miss many wonderful conclusions and insights from those with whom we might disagree. This bifurcation that obscures the fact that as we meet Jesus again, setting aside the commentaries for a moment, we might consider that maybe—just maybe—Jesus meant to hold the two together. He meant for his disciples to hold in tension the importance of servanthood *and* the freeing power of his death. That we have been freed *from* so that we might be freed *for*.

Remember the billboards? *Jesus saves*. That's the good news—the *euangellion*, the gospel—we are called to live and teach. *Jesus saves*. We who believe this truth begin with an unspoken assumption that perhaps should be spoken here among us. *We need a Savior*.

Here is what that means: On my own, on our own, we are simply not capable of living as God intends. That without quite literal divine intervention, we will simply never find our way to lives of abundance and significance. That on our own we will never be “great,” not in the way Jesus understands greatness, because on our own we will continue to define it on our own terms. Just as James and John did.

Let's be honest. We've been taught to rely on human power, and it has left us empty. We have been taught that suffering is weakness and domination is strength. We've been taught to deny limitations, to assert absolute freedom. We need to be delivered from this way of seeing the world. It has taken us in all the wrong directions. *Yes, we need a Savior*.

And here is the good news, the gospel. Jesus saves. He saves us by demonstrating a different way that is in fact the only way to greatness—the path of servanthood. *And*, he saves us by sacrificing his own life to deliver us from the powers that work to thwart the purpose of God in our lives. In the love of Jesus Christ, we have been set free from captivity to that mistaken way of seeing the world.

All of us need a Savior. Over the last couple of weeks, I've engaged in a kind of experiment. In conversations over cups of coffee, at lunch tables, on Zoom meetings, in casual encounters, and even two driveway conversations, I have been asking all kinds of folks this question: *From what do you need to be saved?* A good question to meditate on for just a moment. *From what do you need to be saved?* Of course, the answers have been as diverse and specific as the people I've asked. Some of us need to be saved from late-night doomscrolling on social media. Some from the impulse to control the people around us. Some need to be saved from the anxiety of trauma. Some from corrupt systems, some from feelings of

anger that will not let them go, from guilt and shame over past mistakes, from hostility toward those with whom we disagree, from incessant fear over the future, from insecurity of our own abilities, from ourselves. Diverse answers, to be sure. Still, I couldn't help but note the common thread that weaves them all together. It is a universal deeply held desire to have our vision lifted higher, to have our purpose made clearer. It is that sense that there is more yet to be discovered, more joy still to be experienced, more abundance to be lived. All of us need to be delivered from the lie that says all that is is all there is. I believe we need to be delivered from the evil of indifference and the demon of apathy.

Back to the billboard. I believe it with all my heart. Not that following Jesus is easy, or simple, or straightforward. Not that the suffering and death of Jesus releases us from all suffering in this broken world. Not that we who follow Jesus will be placed in positions of authority and power. No, I believe that *Jesus saves*.

That Jesus saves me from captivity to dead-end perceptions of human power, self-sufficiency, or control. That we are freed to serve.

I believe that Jesus saves me from pernicious systems and demonic powers that resist God's purpose and challenge God's kingdom. We are freed to serve.

I believe that Jesus saves us from the final enemy—the power of death itself, not just physical death, but the dying of hope and faith, the fear that lurks behind every other fear. My friends, we are freed. We are freed to serve.

And *that* is good news. Amen.