

“All the Way In”

Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10: 35-45; Luke 22:24-27

Good Friday Tenebrae Service

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

April 15, 2022

It is the most insensitive, selfish question they ever asked. This is no faux pas. They are serious. They want it so badly they even ask their mother to go to bat for them.

“Teacher,” James and John say, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask.” To get the full effect, break it down into bites: We - want you – to do for us – whatever we ask. Unlimited, unconditional greed. What parent would approve such a request? What boss would agree to such a demand? What teacher would accept such a petition? They treat Jesus more like a Genie rubbed up from a lamp, than God’s Son come from heaven.

And yet their Teacher is willing to listen. “What is it you want?” Jesus asks. Imagine the possibilities: the winning numbers to the Jerusalem Power Ball, a hot tip on the Damascus Stock Exchange or perhaps their own private island – say Manhattan or Australia. James and John set their sights higher. “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” In two of the gospels, this request comes just before Palm Sunday. James, John and their mom believe Jesus is about to set up an eternal kingdom in Jerusalem that will spread throughout the world. So these two sons of Zebedee put in their bids to be the left and right hand men in the new administration. What a success story. From gutting fish to glory in just three years. Not long ago they were slinging sardines. Now they are ready to rule nations. It’s not enough for them to be part of the inner circle. They have to be first. Like some cutthroat game of musical chairs these two race for the most powerful seats ahead of the other ten. Now that’s selfish.

What makes them insensitive is their timing. In all three gospels, their request comes immediately after Jesus predicts He will be arrested, condemned, mocked, flogged and killed in Jerusalem. Imagine your dad announces his condition is terminal, he has only days to live and your first question is, “Can I have the antiques, silver, and china?”

Jesus’ reply is simple and, perhaps, touched with sorrow. “You don’t know what you are asking.” Clearly, the disciples do not understand Jesus’ mission. Nor do they know what they are getting themselves into. There is no throne, no palace, no earthly empire waiting in Jerusalem. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Without a hint of hesitation, they say, “You bet!” But the cup Jesus will drain brims over with mocking, flogging and crucifixion. And the baptism? Jesus will be fully immersed in all the sin and suffering of humanity. He goes all the way in. By Friday, there are no thrones on the right and left of Jesus. Just two crosses. And when it comes time to take those places, James and John do not volunteer.

We rarely go all the way in. When it comes to following Jesus, we may only stick a toe or a hand in the water. We want salvation but not sacrifice, blessings but not obedience, freedom but not faithfulness. We want a Savior not a Lord, a crown with little commitment. ‘I’ll give you my time for an hour or two on Sunday morning, Lord. But the rest is mine.’ ‘I’ll seek you when I’m in trouble, but I have other things to think about when all is well.’ ‘I’ll talk about You in church Jesus, but don’t expect me to be open about my faith around my friends.’

‘You can baptize my date book Lord, but don’t ask for my wallet.’ ‘I’ll serve you when I have the time, Jesus. But now is not the time or place.’ ‘I want you to do for me whatever I ask, but don’t ask me to do whatever you want.’ ‘I’ll dangle my feet in the water but don’t expect me to jump in.’

James and John’s power play causes an eruption of anger among the other disciples. Jesus seizes the moment to teach a crucial life lesson. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28). God designs us for service, not self-centeredness. The core of our problem is pride and sin. The center of those two words is “I.” The word *ego* is Greek for “I.” The Great “I” is on the throne in our hearts. The Great “I” tries to grab control and take charge of all around it – often with painful and sometimes tragic results.

The world defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, prestige, and position. If you can demand service from others, you’ve arrived. Jesus measures greatness in terms of service, not status. It’s how many people you serve, not how many serve you. This is so contrary to the world’s idea of greatness we have a hard time understanding it, much less practicing it. Like James and John, we argue about who deserves the most prominent position. The Great “I” must surrender to the Great “I Am.”

Why serve Jesus? Why should you fully immerse your life in Him? Why should you go all the way in? Because He is the only One who did sit on a celestial throne, who did rule the world and the universe. And He is the only One who gave it all up to become the servant of all. He fully immersed Himself in our sin in order to set us free. This night reminds us that, on the Cross, He went all the way in for you.

On August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed just after taking off from the Detroit airport, killing 155 people. Miraculously there was one survivor: a four-year-old girl from Tempe, Arizona, named Cecelia. When rescuers found Cecelia they did not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators first assumed Cecelia had been a passenger in one of the cars on the highway where the airliner crashed. But when the passenger register was checked, there was Cecelia’s name.

Cecelia survived because, as the plane was falling, Cecelia’s mother, Paula Chican, unbuckled her own seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around Cecelia, and then would not let her go. Nothing could separate that child from her parent’s love—neither tragedy nor disaster, neither the fall nor the flames that followed, neither height nor depth, neither life nor death.

Such is the love of your Savior for you. He left heaven, lowered himself all the way into our sin, and covered us with the sacrifice of his own body to save us.¹

Now He calls you to come serve. Come to the waters. Come all the way in.

¹ Bryan Chapell, *In the Grip of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992)