

**“Overheard Along the Way”**  
**Texts: Ephesians 2:1-10; Matthew 10:32-44**  
**The Reverend Joanna M. Adams**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
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*But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Mark 10:38*

This morning marks the halfway point on our 40-day, five-Sunday Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem a colorful, raucously festive parade in his honor will be quickly followed by his betrayal, by his trial, by the denial of those closest to him, and finally by his death on the cross on a hill between two thieves.

Today, Mark allows us to listen in on a conversation that took place on the road as Jesus and his disciples made their way to the great City of David. All along the way the disciples had listened as he taught the people; they had watched as he had healed the sick and cast out demons. Everywhere they went crowds leaned in to hear him. They reached out to touch him in the hope that his power would transform them. Twice, he has taken the disciples aside and instructed them not to be fooled by his popularity or dazzled by his deeds, lest they misunderstood who he was and for what purpose he had come. "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected," he told them. "The Son of Man must be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him. In three days after being killed, he will rise again." Each time he spoke, they heard him, but they did not understand him.

Things seem to have gotten no better, as today in our text, they approach the city; Jesus is walking in front. The twelve are strung out behind him. Jesus is aware of what he is facing, but he strides along with great purpose, while the twelve stumble along, unsure of their way. Jesus senses their insecurity, and so for the third time, the third time, he takes them aside and tells them the score. He outlines for them the anguishing events that are about to unfold: his being handed over, condemned to death, his being spat upon and flogged. You would think that with all of those details they would finally have gotten it, but no, you can tell they hadn't. At least two had not. James and John come forward to Jesus, and they say, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we want you to do." If you think that sounds a little childlike, it is because it is a little childlike. But then again, we all understand that phenomenon: It won't hurt to ask, will it? Like a good parent, Jesus makes them tell him what they want from him. (1) "We want to sit one on your right hand and one on your left hand when you come into your glory." This is the seat of highest honor and then the seat just below the seat of highest honor. The two must have figured that the first ones to ask for the heavenly prizes would be the ones who would receive the heavenly prizes. But

first-come, first-served is not an operative principle in the realm we call the kingdom of Christ. In fact the opposite is true, though James and John just didn't get it. They were all eaten up by a condition that I would call big shot disease. It still affects many today. Is an especially virulent condition, in that it not only corrodes the character of those who have the disease themselves, it hurts just about everybody else over whom big shots have power. If you think that all the good stuff ought to come your way, if you don't mind stepping over other people to get to the trough first, if you wish to have more than everybody else, if you wish to have a more glorious standing in the world than everybody else, then you probably are showing the symptoms of pretty far along big shot disease. We have seen a lot of it lately, from the executives of AIG to our personal favorite, Bernie Madoff. But they are not the only ones. Greed, that is, the wish to have more than your share of either money or glory or whatever, is all around us. The mortgage lenders whose fecklessness has led to foreclosures all across our land and to the near ruination of the real estate market come to mind. Big shot disease has clearly not been eradicated.

We are in the middle of the phenomenon called March Madness. (I'm changing the subject.) I like basketball. If you're not a follower of college basketball, then you may have a hard time understanding how it is that ordinary people lose their minds over a game that involves a ball and two baskets. The newspapers and the sports commentators love to focus on the stars of the teams. I'm no expert on basketball, but I would venture to guess that the teams that make it through the playoffs and on to the final four, and then the final two, are teams that of course have stars, but whose stars are also able to step aside from the desire for personal glory. They are able to lose themselves in what the wonderful theologian and basketball fan Bill Placher called "a kind of self-forgetfulness." It is that "self-forgetfulness that paradoxically makes a basketball player greater as a team member than they would ever have been as individuals." (2)

This is the problem with James and John. They wanted more than to be a team player with the other 10 disciples. They wanted to be the stars, to get out in front, to have the place of honor. I don't want to be too hard on them though, because you know, the place of honor is not a bad place to sit. Who is immune to wanting these kinds of things? Remember the great American phenomenon called "keeping up with the Joneses". In the 1990s and early 2000s, it became "getting way ahead of the Joneses". A guest columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote last week, "Lending practices in the late 2000s allowed us to add a second or third vehicle to our fleet of cars. With easier mortgage rules we abandoned our adequate starter homes for McMansions. The idea of two maybe three vacations a year became a matter of course. We loved to do things that enabled us to display our status. We ate out, we tanned in strip malls. We bought gym memberships and apparently we charged everything." (3)

I do not buy this blanket indictment, but there is something about these words that ring true, something about us that keeps us from saying *I've got enough*

*already! I need more*, we tell ourselves. *I need to be at the head of the line*. And actually, ambition and drive are pretty good human characteristics, don't you think? Where would we be if scientists did not keep doing their research, if explorers had not struck out to discover the world, if astronomers did not explore the mysteries of the heavens, always after more knowledge? To use Tennyson's words, "It is good to strive and to seek". But here is the problem, and it is an acute problem, and it is an acute problem in our society. The problem with wanting comes when the only thing we strive for is our own personal glory, when what drives us is what we want for ourselves, when getting ahead of the others becomes what matter most.

James and John asked Jesus, "When you come into your glory, we want to be up front, with you." They were asking the right person, but they were asking for the wrong thing.(4) It was only because Jesus had compassion for them that he didn't wring their necks right there on the road.

Instead, he said to them, "You don't know what you're asking", which is obvious. The two who would end up on his right and his left were those who would be crucified alongside him, on the hill called Golgotha. "Can you drink the cup of my suffering? Will you be able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized", meaning not only the baptism in the Holy Spirit, but also the death that he was about to undergo. And then in one of the most striking statements of humility ever made, Jesus says to the two of them, "The power is not even mine to grant where you sit in the heavenly places. God is in charge of that." What a reminder from this One who came to show us how to be human. He never lorded it over anybody. He never claimed more than was his due; he lay down his life as a ransom for many. Why? Because he came to serve, not to be served.

A lot is being written these days about the decline of Christianity. In America, the number of people who call themselves Christians - down 10% since 1990. There are many reasons for this, including the sometimes mean-spirited face the church shows to the world, as well as increased religious diversity, the privatization of religion as in *I believe, but I don't have to go to church. I can get what I need on my own*. I believe another reason is this: Christianity has been watered down to a feel-good, get your needs met, no demand, no substance sort of thing. People give up on Christianity, not because it's too hard, but because it's too easy. It's so easy, it makes no difference whether you believe or not. Jesus becomes trivialized, his message softened into an emotional uplift, his cross tucked away in the closet.

In a book entitled *Believing in Jesus Christ*, Leanne Van Dyk writes, "You can now order a Visa card from the Internet with a picture of Jesus on it. The website pitches the card with this line, 'Show the world your love for the Most High. Buy with the Jesus Visa card.' They also sell Jesus playing cards, key chains, earrings, lapel pins," and so on. (5)

James and John said yes, they were able to drink the cup that Jesus was going to drink. I admire the fact that they wanted to do the right thing. They simply could not get it in their heads and in their hearts that the right thing would be a costly thing. Who knows that in advance, other than Jesus? I think you just step out there and do what needs to be done, and sometimes it costs you a lot. I doubt that Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew what he was in for when he decided to board a ship and returned to Germany, his homeland. The great theologian of the 20th century, born into a privileged family, brilliant scholar and pastor became one of the world's great thinkers and interpreters of Christianity. He taught at Union Seminary in New York City. He distinguished himself there, could have stayed a lifetime, occupying a place of honor. But he returned to Germany hearing how things were falling apart with Adolf Hitler at the helm of state. He eventually came to participate in a resistance movement against Hitler. He was arrested. During his imprisonment, he studied the Gospel of Mark. He thought of it as one long preparation for Christ's death and crucifixion - one long journey toward Jerusalem culminating with the execution of a Roman prisoner called Jesus. On April 9th, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had everything - intellect, privilege, prestige, money - was led from his cell to the prison yard where members of the SS Black Guard hanged him. (6)

"Seekest thou great things for thyself?" Bonhoeffer wrote from prison. "Seek them not. . .". "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die." (7)

Just before church today, one of the travelers to Pearlinton, Mississippi, was describing his new friendship with the pastor in Pearlinton. He told me that the wife of the Baptist minister nearby had been preparing meals for people who had been wiped out by the hurricane, and for people who had come to help out, for the past three years. Every day, she cooks. Surely when she started, she didn't know it was going to be her life mission. She isn't interested in being great. She knows that true glory, true meaning in life comes from being servant of all.

Well, the other 10 disciples get mad at their pushy teammates. They are ready to ring the necks of the two who ask for everything. By this time, I imagine, Jesus was ready to turn the whole bunch in and call a new set of disciples, but it was too late for that. Besides, who else did he have but them? And they - they're just like us. We've put halos around the heads of people in the Bible, but, listen, we are James and John. We are Peter and Andrew. There is no one but us. "There's never been a great generation of whole men and women, who lived well, even for one day. It's just us, and we are all God's got." (8) We probably won't do any better than they did, but they did alright, because they stumbled along, and in spite of themselves, they were empowered by the Gospel. They were led by the light of Christ; they bore their witness. And those to whom they witnessed told the others, and they told the others. And so here we are now, because twelve finally did, or eleven rather, and their cohorts, finally did give up their yearnings for glory and found glory, the glory of serving.

Thursday morning, when Mrs. Carter was here, I could not help thinking about what I might be doing at 7:30 in the morning when I'm 81 years old, and how I might have earned the right to sleep a little later, maybe even had breakfast in bed, or sent a letter and have someone read it. But no, here she was, full of passion about the suffering and neglect of the mentally ill in our state. How she worries about their well-being, how she gets up early and does what she can, not to lord it over people because she is the First Lady, but because she takes her Christianity with a cross at the heart of it. To God be the glory for the likes of her.

(1) Lamar Williamson, *Mark*, John Knox Press, 1983.

(2) William J. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p. 70.

(3) William Egart.

(4) From a sermon preached by Eugene Bay at Bryn Mawr Church, 3/14/99.

(5) As quoted by John Buchanan at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 3/8/09.

(6) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Digest*, Vol. 37, year B, April, May, June, 2009, p.35.

(7) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

(8) Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*.