

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

We should be embarrassed for James and John today, saying out loud words that others might think but wouldn't dare to articulate. And maybe we *are* uncomfortable with what we hear them say to Jesus in this passage from Mark. But I suspect we can overhear their brashness without being surprised by it. It could have come from a corporate boardroom, from the halls of congress—even from within our own church. These words the brothers speak so boldly demonstrate an attitude that has unfortunately become commonplace in our society, but we would rather *not* think these twelve men who put their lives on hold to follow Jesus could say such things.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” These are his friends, of course, and he's not only gentle with them in his response, we get the feeling that he wants to give them what they ask, he wants to please them. “What exactly is it that you want?” he asks. Was he surprised when they answered, “We want to sit next to you in your glory.” This was probably not what he expected, and it's clear to him that the glory they're looking for is the glory of power, *not* the glorification that comes from suffering and sacrifice.

At this point in their lives with Jesus, despite the repeated discussions about what would happen to him, these men don't understand—they *can't* understand—what is ahead for him. They think they know how'll they'll react if it happens the way Jesus says. After all, they've been with him for some time now, and in their ignorant cockiness they're convinced that they're ready for whatever turn their lives take. But Jesus knows better. We wonder if he might have been relieved to tell them that what they ask isn't up to him. “I'm not here to award places of honor in the kingdom of God.”

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” These words were just as counter-cultural in Jesus' day as they are in our own. Nobody—nobody!—wants to be a slave, especially with the connotations that title has for us as we continue to engage in the fight for civil rights. We don't particularly like the word “servant” either. Whether it evokes visions of “the help” from mid-twentieth century America, or those who lived and worked in the basement of the Manor House in Downton Abbey, that is not the life we want. We want abundance and standing and, yes, the power that comes through position, position that every one of us here today enjoys whether we realize it or not.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” We profess that we want to be just like him. But we have to draw the line somewhere, don't we. And besides, if we really wanted to be like him, if we really wanted to be servant to many, we probably wouldn't know where to begin. We don't understand the nuances of sacrifice or the boundaries that help us know what part of ourselves to give and what part of ourselves to keep. Somewhere along the way—maybe way back there in the ancient Middle East—we became consumers of faith, consumers of belief, consumers who often look to God in Christ, especially in and through the church, to take care of what we want, what we need—or what we think we need. What can you do for me, Jesus? Hasn't he done enough already? Isn't it time for *us* to do something for *him*?

This week the priests in our diocese gathered at Lake Logan for our annual clergy conference. It's a time for us to be together as friends and colleagues, to worship together, to learn together from someone who has been invited to inform and excite and inspire us. Unfortunately, that last part doesn't always happen. We may be ordained but we're just like everyone else in so many ways. We already have too much to do, responsibilities and commitments at home and in our churches, and besides, we've heard most of this stuff before, just like you have. But this year was different.

Our guest speaker was Elaine Heath, who shared with us that she was raised in poverty in a family that was, as she says, fiercely non-religious, fractured by alcohol and violence. Her mother was a nurse in a time when nurses weren't paid much. Her father was often unemployed or absent, and the family moved a lot, back and forth across the Pacific Northwest, Montana, and Alaska. Like her siblings, Elaine left home as a teenager, seeking safety before she ever finished high school.<sup>1</sup>

Elaine is now Dr. Heath, an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and Professor of Evangelism at the Perkins School of Theology at SMU. Evangelism is something she knows and understands because she has experienced it. She came to know Jesus through public school teachers and neighbors, ordinary Christians with busy lives and other things to do who reached out to her with prayer, hospitality and justice, providing her with a community that gave her love and a sense of belonging, often through simple occasions like playing monopoly at a kitchen table. In these people, Elaine met Jesus, and through them, she experienced the Kingdom of God. By the way, she emphasizes that none of them were clergy.

It's often hard, I think to practice something we've never experienced and haven't been taught sufficiently, particularly when there's a stigma attached to it. That's certainly how most of us view evangelism, not in the true meaning of it, which is, as Dr. Heath puts it, the invitation to discipleship, a call to holiness, an incarnational immersion in the love of God. Even on the level of that meaning, evangelism scares us because we believe it requires us to be "good," which, by the way we are, and perfect, which we never can be. What Jesus wanted from James and John and the others was discipleship, *not* an aspiration to be powerful, or even to be part of the hierarchy that has defined humankind for longer than we can remember. Jesus knew that through discipleship, that is, through our belief in him, and by patterning our lives as he did, to be an incarnational immersion in the love of God, his followers would share his love with others almost without thinking about it. Notice I changed the pronouns from them—from those first disciples—to us, his present day disciples.

To pattern our lives as he did, to be incarnationally immersed in the love of God, surely sounds lofty and perhaps impossible. Dr. Heath offers four steps to guide us on the way: show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, and release the outcome. It's what she calls a "contemplative stance," a manner of living our faith both inwardly and outwardly. Each step is both easy and hard, requiring both stillness and action for folks who often find comfort and easiness in one or the other, but not both. For Elaine Heath, and for others like her, these four steps are part of a rule of life, designed to bring both intention and purpose to a life of faith. Truth be told, it probably couldn't get much easier than what she suggests. Show up. Pay attention. Cooperate with God. Let God take care of the outcome. Isn't that what Jesus did?

Verna Dozier wrote, "The world is not as God would have it be. The kingdoms of this world are not yet the kingdom of God, but they can become it. They are not yet the realm where God's sovereignty is acknowledged and lived out, but they can become it."

We are not yet the servants who make God's love known through love and kindness. Not through power or glory, but through love and kindness. With the help of our Lord, we *can* become those servants. In the name of our Lord, we *will* become them. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Heath, Elaine A. and Duggins, Larry. *Missional. Monastic. Mainline. A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions.* Cascade Books, Eugene, 2014, p. 9-10.