

Sunday, October 18, 2015
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 10:35-45

We Do

At my wedding seventeen years ago, I caused a ripple of laughter when it was my turn to respond to the declaration of intent. (This story will come as no surprise to people who know me to be overly eager.) The presiding minister turned to me and asked, “Do you, Erin, take Tim...” I was sure that this was a good guy that I was about to marry, and I was of the opinion that at weddings it is often very hard to hear what was going on up front. So I responded, firmly, and it turns out, very loudly, “I DO.” There was a moment’s pause as people tried to choke down chuckles, efforts at which they were ultimately unsuccessful. “Well okay,” said the minister, who happened to be Tim’s father: “It appears this wedding is really going down.”

I think of my bold response when I read what two of the disciples say in today’s gospel reading from Mark. The two disciples, James and John, stand in front of Jesus, and he says to them, “Do you, James and John, know what you are asking? Are you able to do this?” “We are able!” they say, “We do!” with just as much awareness as any young couple getting married. Now, I grant I was perhaps a little louder than is typical, but my volume just highlighted the distinctiveness, and incongruity, of what happens when people join together in a covenantal relationship before God. At weddings, you make these grand declarations about what you will do: have and hold, for richer for poorer, for better or for worse—with very little awareness of with what it all means, with what it will ask of you, with all that love entails. You don’t know what you are saying.

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus says to the two disciples when they approach him, not to be married, but to ask to be honored, to have a special place. James and John approach Jesus, just the two of them, something a little furtive about it, just the two of them. And something manipulative about it, too—although calling it manipulative almost makes these two sound too clever. James and John are trying to work an angle, but they do so so baldly it’s almost laughable. Just look at the way they begin the conversation: “Teacher, we want you to do something for us.” It’s like when someone asks you, “Will you do me a favor?” Your response is, “What’s the favor?” But these two disciples don’t even ask, they state, they declare. They say, “Teacher, we want you to do something for us.”

As you would, Jesus asks for some clarification, “What is it that you want me to do?” Then it is that we hear why it was just the two, James and John, who approached Jesus, because there are only two places of honor: the place at Jesus’ right, and the place at his left. They want those two places. “Do you know what you are asking?” Jesus says. “Are you able to drink the cup I will drink?” “We are able! We do!” say James and John.

They do not know that the cup that Jesus will drink is a cup of suffering. Jesus knows this, agonizes over it. Just a little later in the gospel, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus will pray that that, if possible, cup could be removed from him. Then he will be betrayed, arrested, abandoned, tortured, mocked, crucified. And on the cross, a cup will be raised to his lips, a sponge filled with sour wine. On the cross, the place of public execution, the least honorable way to die, there are two places, one at his right, and one at his left. They are occupied by criminals. “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus says to James and John.

When the other disciples hear about this conversation they are angry. The two’s attempt at self-promotion is so clunky it is almost humorous, and so that it makes the ten angry is revealing. People get angry when others grab for stuff that they themselves want. As one

commentator notes, “those who are most appalled at the self-aggrandizement of others often secretly long to aggrandize themselves.” Why does it bother the ten that James and John want the two places of honor? Because the ten want those two places for themselves.

Teacher that he is, Jesus turns to all the disciples, to all who would be his disciples, to you and to me, and describes a place of honor that is available, not just to two, but to all of us, the place of honor that is pursued in a very different way. “You know how it is,” Jesus says. “You know how people get grabby and self-aggrandizing. That’s not what makes you great,” Jesus says. “That’s not how it is with me. That’s not why I came. I came to serve. I came to ransom. I came to release, to release you, so you can also serve, because that’s what makes you great.”

At our church on the day of our annual meeting, we recognize someone who serves, someone who gives of themselves, helping others, volunteering. We recognize this person as this year’s recipient of the Donna Jean Holmquist Award. There’s a plaque at the back of the church, which has place for their name on it. There are places for the names of others who’ve received it, many who are here today, and there are still more places left, right and center. We recognize these people and that they serve, we do that, because that’s how we are Jesus’ disciples, that’s how we do church.

We also make declarations, as a church. In this way, what we do is a lot like a marriage: we join together with one another in a covenantal relationship before God, and we declare things, bold things: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” And we declare: “Peace be with you.” And we declare: “Thanks be to God.” We do this every Sunday, it’s built into the framework of worship: these bold declarations, which we seek to know with ever deepening awareness.

We’ll make declarations today after church as well, in the framework of our annual meeting. We’ll have various opportunities to declare our intent, to vote. Like the joining of two people in marriage, what we consider is significant. And, like couples saying I do, we don’t know all of what we are saying. Now I am not advocating uninformed or blanket approvals. Leaders here have put a lot of time into evaluating our situation and preparing materials. We do want you to know what we are asking. But what this meeting, what all annual meetings are really about, is a renewal of vows. Whether you have been part of this place for less than one year, or many more than seventeen years, today, you and I have the chance to say again, “We do.” Today we can declare that we will be a church together, that we will grow in service, that we will grow in love, with all that includes, even things we do not know, even suffering. Today we will say, “We do.” And we can say it loudly, we can say it with joyous laughter—not because we know what we are doing, but because God does. Not because we are able, but because God is. With God, all things are possible. And so we can do all things, through Christ who strengthens us.

As in a marriage, God takes our promises and makes them holy, makes our ignorance into wisdom, makes our giving selfless, makes our love even greater, through a future still unfolding before us. God’s love for God’s people is like a marriage—it’s a metaphor that runs throughout the Bible, through the Old and New Testaments, it’s a comparison Jesus himself makes in parables, and in John’s gospel it is a wedding that is the occasion of Jesus’ first miracle, his first sign: which is to make more wine—good wine, the finest wine. In Christ, the cup of suffering becomes the cup of salvation, lifted up for us at the communion table. In Christ, God’s love for us is as eager and as all-encompassing as that of two people who pledge themselves to one another, with all that that are, body and soul. God does this for us in Christ, and even death will not part us.