

The Baptism of Jesus, Part 2

Mark 10:35-45

There are two groups of disciples in this story: James and John on the one hand, and the other ten disciples on the other. James and John come to Jesus and make this request: *“When you come into your glory, let one of us sit on either side of you.”* In other words, when you take over, Jesus, let us be your closest advisors, your most trusted counselors, the second most powerful people in your kingdom, second only to you.

The only thing we know about the other ten disciples is that they are angry when they find out what aspiring power brokers James and John have requested.

But, I’m curious – which group of disciples do you feel most akin to? If you were there, would you be a James and John kind of disciple, eager to gain as much advantage as possible from your relationship with Messiah Jesus; or would you be more like the other ten – angry and resentful that the Thunder Brothers had tried to gain such an advantage?

If you find yourself identifying with the ten angry disciples, you’re probably in the majority. After all, few of us really appreciate the maneuverings of the power-hungry. Few things grind on us like watching someone brown-nose with the boss or the influential folks in town so that they can gain some advantage from it...maybe the inside track to a promotion, or just to be seen among the upper crust. It’s irritating isn’t it, to listen to name-droppers casually mention well-known people as though they are the best of friends. And, how many of those who work on political campaigns do so because they really believe in what the candidate stands for, or because they want to get a little power themselves and they think they’re backing the right horse?

Do you want to know one of my pet peeves? When I’m driving on the highway and there’s construction ahead; signs tell you miles beforehand that the two lanes are going to merge into one. Then they tell you to begin to merge, so you merge. Then the traffic slows to a crawl or stops, but these people keep driving past you in the lane that is about to close, so they can gain an advantage, move to the front of the line, well, at least move in front of me, while I’m being the good driver who gets over when he’s supposed to. Burns me up. So, if that’s you doing that, I want you to know that I am not thinking Christian thoughts about you, and I am not alone. You are being James and John – trying to get an advantage, move ahead of the people around you, and we don’t appreciate it.

So, yes, we can understand the disciples’ anger. But maybe we can also understand James and John. In fact, maybe some of us identify more with them. After all, who among us is really against getting ahead in life? Who among us doesn’t feel a little bit of competitive satisfaction for getting that promotion, getting the best grade in the class, receiving the invitation our neighbors didn’t get?

Don’t you just love it when nobody lets that person in from the lane that is closing, and you drive casually by them, as close as you can possibly be to the car in front of you, so that you end up ahead of them? As long as I’m ahead of them, I win.

Who doesn’t like to be noticed by the boss? Who doesn’t like to have people whisper as you pass, “That’s the one who won the science fair, or the track meet, or who made first chair, got the lead in the play. That’s the person who got the big promotion, was asked to serve on that special commission.”

Isn’t it fairly likely that at least part of the reason the disciples resented James and John was because they desired the same thing, they just didn’t have the chutzpah to ask for it? After all, if it didn’t matter to them, why would they be bothered by the brothers’ request? So, in a sense, all twelve disciples are playing the same game, wanting to get ahead, and resenting those who beat them to it, who worked harder at it than they did.

But Jesus isn’t playing that game at all. He simply says here, *“You do not understand what you are asking. You do not understand the cup of suffering I am about to drink, the baptism of sacrifice I am about to be baptized with. And you do not understand what it means to be baptized yourself with my baptism.”* And, later, when the disciples are there and everyone’s mad at each other, Jesus explains this cup, this baptism that not only he must be baptized with, but his followers must accept as well.

He says, “In this world, it is all about getting ahead. It is about winning the game. He or she who dies with the most toys, the most clothes, the nicest house, the most friends, the most power, wins in this world. That is the baptism of this world: a baptism of me-first; a baptism of accumulation – accumulation of possessions, friends, money, power, ladder rungs. But if you are going to follow me, you must be baptized with a different baptism. My baptism means that you are to die to the rung-climbing self-

advancement of this world, and begin to put my life above yours, my will above yours, my goals and values above your own. *My baptism means being willing to suffer for the benefit of those around you, for the benefit of my kingdom.*

When Jesus asks James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” he is referring to the cup of suffering, the baptism of death Jesus will endure for the benefit of others. The brothers say they are able and Jesus says, yes, you will drink from that cup and be baptized with that baptism, and, according to church tradition, James and John were, indeed, martyred for their faith in Jesus. Around the world today there are Christians who are drinking that cup, being baptized with that baptism, suffering even to the point of death, simply because they are followers of Jesus Christ.

However, Jesus’ baptism does not call upon all of us to endure that kind of suffering, but it does call upon us all to suffer. I am not talking about the suffering everyone experiences in life due to health problems or financial woes or the many ways we suffer because life is hard. I am talking about willingly suffering, sacrificing, in order to benefit the people around you, to make their lives better. This is the change required of us if we are baptized into Jesus Christ – our lives become no longer our own. Our time is no longer our own; our money is no longer our own; our goals, our talents and abilities, our priorities are no longer our own.

Today we ordain and install those whom we believe God has called to lead us through the next several years. May we who are leaders come to a deeper understanding of what this means – that we are baptized into Jesus Christ, which means we are changed people, no longer living for ourselves, but living for Christ and for Christ’s kingdom. We are called upon to suffer, to sacrifice for the benefit of those around us. We are called upon to sacrifice our time, our talents, our treasure; we are called to be servants.

And may we who are being led follow the example of our leaders. When volunteers are requested, remember that you are no longer living for yourself. Sacrifice for the benefit of others. When you are asked to use the gifts and talents you have to help others or to help the church, remember that you are baptized into Jesus Christ. He sacrificed himself for you and calls you to sacrifice for others. When we are called upon to give financially, may we give sacrificially, for the benefit of others.

This is what it means to be baptized with the baptism of Jesus – to die to ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves in ways that make the lives of those around us better, to serve rather than be served.

But, I will tell you a secret, reveal a mystery to you. In fact, it is one of the greatest, deepest mysteries of this life: if you are willing to sacrifice yourself for Jesus Christ and his work, for the benefit, the service of those around you, you will find deep within you a resurrection; a life, a glow, a peace, a joy that no amount of getting ahead can provide. For the baptism of Jesus Christ is not just a baptism of death, dying to your own will and desires. It is a baptism of resurrection to a new life that is so much greater, more joyful, more meaningful, better in every way.

Let us live out our baptism in Jesus Christ as we serve him and his world.