

Walking with Jesus

A long season calls for some exercise. So, let's take a walk with Jesus this October. As you might suspect, walking with Jesus is not only good for the body, but is also good for the mind as Jesus often asks us to stretch our thinking into new possibilities and new understandings. Our walk with Jesus is also good for our senses, as we are invited to see what we had overlooked before, to hear the cries from those often kept silent, and to feel a connection with those in our community whether they are already a part of our church or not. We're exercising our faith as we walk, faith that allows us to see the Spirit at work in us and around us all the time. So, join us this fall. Walking with Jesus, let's just admit, is good exercise all around.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 6, 2024

Such as These

World Communion Sunday

PLANNING NOTES

The journey through Ordinary Time can sometimes feel like driving through the cotton fields of West Texas—fields that stretch for miles and miles toward the horizon with nothing to break things up for the eye. I remember, as a young child, I would look out the window while we drove up into the Texas panhandle to visit family; the monotony was almost dizzying. Beautiful, certainly, yet monotonous. Until suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, we would find ourselves winding our way through the Caprock Escarpment, a canyon that cuts through the flat plains as if inviting you to take a look at the beauty of the earth resting under those never-ending farmlands above. And, if you don't know it's coming, the Caprock can be quite surprising!

World Communion is a bit like the Caprock. In the midst of the meaningful monotony of Ordinary Time pops up this liturgical observance that draws us into a deeper encounter with the underlying reality that, around the globe, we, as followers of Jesus Christ, gather every week to worship and celebrate Holy Communion. For all that makes us different from one another, we share in this sacrament that Christ gave us as a means of grace that helps us remember who we are as the Body of Christ. On this Sunday, we remember that we are connected to one another in the family of God through Jesus Christ and that we all come to the Table to share in this Holy Meal as but a taste of the heavenly banquet we all will share in the presence of God.

Imagine how to make the worldwide church a reality for your local church on this Sunday in particular. While every Sunday presents an opportunity to sing the songs of Christians from around the world, it is especially important on World Communion Sunday to include global songs and/or prayers from Christians in other parts of the world. To tie in with the theme of this worship series, you might sing "We Will Follow/Somlandela" (*Worship and Song*, 3160) or "We Are Marching/Siyahamba" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2235). Or you could weave a hymn like "O-so-so/Come Now, O Prince of Peace" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2232) into a prayer for peace and the well-being of the world.

How might the liturgy and the visuals this Sunday reflect the diversity of the globe represented in your community? What languages are spoken in the neighborhood around your church? What family heritages are represented in your congregation? What types of bread can you buy or make that might be

eaten around your neighbors' tables? This is a day to fill the altar and emphasize the generosity and goodness of Christ, the Host of every Holy Communion table. So, fill the altar with bread and juice or representations of wheat and grapes. Make the space a visual cornucopia of the diversity and abundance of God's creation and the Table where God invites us to take, bless, eat, and drink together. May this celebration draw you and your congregation into the surprising and beautiful depths of what it means to worship as the Body of Christ in different places and yet all at once.

PREACHING NOTES

The scripture passage this week is long, isn't it? Not only is it long, but it is also difficult. Touchy. Okay, maybe not so long, but it feels long as we work our way through it. That was exactly what the Pharisees were trying to do. They wanted to run rings around Jesus; they wanted to confuse him; they wanted to catch him out. They wanted him to look foolish. They wanted him to take a stand on an issue that was sure to cause division. Or anger. Or hurt. They were constantly trying to get him in trouble with the people. Yet, Jesus managed to find ways to avoid that trouble. He didn't avoid the issue as it was presented, but he managed to turn it around in such a way that it was hard to take offense or to keep the argument boiling. He defused what we call "hot-button" issues.

So, what is the preacher to do today? We live on the edge of a boil, on the verge of an argument ready to break out. Is it better to avoid or to take a stand? Is it better to talk around an issue or to face it head on? You are the expert on your community. You know what can be heard and what will not be. Maybe one of the considerations is not whether to address a delicate issue, but where to do so. Is the pulpit – traditionally understood as a monological medium with no room for conversation – the best place to get into the issues in the text this week? Do we recast the preaching moment and allow for a more dialogical approach? If so, then realize that many long-term members have not been prepared for such conversation and may not respond as you might hope. Maybe what you might work toward is a seed-planting moment with a clear opportunity to continue the conversation somewhere else. Or let the sacrament be the invitation to go deeper, to listen more, to respond openly.

It's World Communion Sunday this week--a date when we remember that when we partake of the sacrament of Holy Communion, we don't do it alone. This meal we share is not for us alone. The ritual is performed in more languages than we can count; the bread takes many forms and flavors. The celebrants come in all colors and answer to a variety of titles. It's a World Communion observance in a diverse and divided world. And it's a world with needs as real as bread and hungers as deep as the ocean.

Here's a question – "Is Communion primarily a spiritual event or a physical one?" Well, it's a bit of both. But don't we lean to the spiritual side? Sure, there is bread and juice, but it is the grace and the remembrance that really make it Communion. Our task on Communion days is to experience the presence of Christ, isn't it? It's our task to transport ourselves onto a spiritual plane and commune with the one who set the table. We're to move beyond the mundane to enjoy the sublime. Right?

Well, I'm not so sure. Jesus seemed intent on making things, making faith, real. He was grounded in the reality of the world in which we live. His images of the kingdom and the metaphors he used were of earth - seeds and pearls, light and darkness, sheep and coins, the stuff we live with every day. I think he sat at the table and took hold of the reality of bread and said, "This is my body. This is me. I'm here, I'm as real as bread. And every time you pick up a loaf of bread, you'll be touching me, holding me, claiming me. I'm here, right here in this world with you." He wanted people grounded, not floating around on

some heavenly cloud somewhere. When the disciples tried to turn the talk to the reality of the kingdom, asking about the seating arrangements and the place cards on his table, Jesus got exasperated with them. "This cup," he said, "this cup is my whole life. I'm as present as the clay it took to make this cup. I'm as alive as the bouquet of this wine, the fruit of the vine. I'm that vine," he said. He was trying to get his followers to live in the world, to pay attention to what was right in front of them.

It was a trait of his, issuing an invitation to pay attention. He was always pointing to the most unlikely things and the most unlikely people and asking his followers to see them, to really see them. As Mark records,

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (*Mark 10:13-16 NRSV*)

This is the Jesus we know and love best of all, I believe. But we have to realize that this action was a radical departure from normal behavior. No one with any authority or power or standing in society in this period of history would even have time for children. It just wasn't done. And yet here is Jesus, not only allowing children to be in his presence, but taking them up in his arms and blessing them. It was almost embarrassing. I am sure that some - like the disciples themselves - were scandalized by this behavior.

Jesus didn't care. What he cared about was blessing. He cared about touching and putting children on his lap because they were real people, worthy of his attention and his presence. He cared about welcoming and including. He cared about making sure that everyone understood the value of those of whom he said, "Let them come." Mark says Jesus was angry; indignant, our translation says. It's a harsh word in Greek. Jesus was trying to be concrete. "You're in the way," he said to his disciples turned bouncers trying to keep the kids away. You're in the way, not just of these kids, but of the kingdom." This was a "get behind me Satan" moment. One of many. The disciples were missing something fundamental. So, Jesus was trying to help his hearers see something of the glory and the wonder of the kingdom, so he grabbed the nearest visual aid he could find.

Come and see, He could have said. See through these eyes the wonder of God's creation. Come and see the needs and the opportunities to serve. Come and see how we can live out the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. And then He gathered them up. So that we could see that the best way to rid oneself of doubts and fears and suspicions and animosity is by getting outside of yourself long enough to bless a child. To talk to them, to listen to them, to experience the world through their eyes.

But then, he wanted to make sure we didn't miss the point here. He wanted to be sure the disciples didn't miss it and that, through them, we don't miss it either. "To such as these belongs the kingdom of God." Actually, he didn't say "belongs." The verb here isn't "belongs." It is "is." *Is*. For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God *is*. *Is*? They've got it, he says, or they are it. You want to embrace the kingdom, embrace a child." Let them come," he says. That means that how we treat children and what we allow done to children or not done to children is what we do to the kingdom of God.

Wow. I mean, wow. Don't you think? And then, in case we were still unclear, Jesus drives it home. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. What does that mean exactly? That's the question that has driven biblical scholars crazy for over two millennia. On the one hand, are we supposed to receive the kingdom as a child would receive the kingdom or as a child would receive anything? Or are we supposed to receive the kingdom in the way we receive a child? Or as we receive a child? In other words, is our ability to receive the kingdom dependent upon how we receive children into our midst? How we treat children or mistreat them, as individuals and as a society. When children suffer at the hands of adults, governments, religious leaders, or parents, are we in danger of losing our grip on the kingdom of God?

Maybe the heaviness of that line of thinking is why most commentators take the other track. How do children receive things? And how do we emulate them? Lots of ink has been spilt trying to answer that. Words like *innocence* and *purity* or *dependance* or *wonder* are often used to help us grasp the attitude it takes to receive the kingdom. But I wonder if it isn't about an attitude, but an action. Attitude is important; I don't mean to suggest that it isn't. Yet, Jesus is being concrete here, grounding us in the world of doing. So maybe his point is more earthy than we tend to think. Simpler. So, how do children receive anything? With both hands. That's how. Then, how shall we receive the kingdom?

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Open the doors and shout greetings to the church across the street. (*Substitute the location of your nearest church neighbors.*)

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Carry greetings across the railroad tracks to those we never meet.

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Send messages and e-mails to Good Christian Friends in Africa and Asia, South America and Europe!

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Extend your hand of fellowship to both the shelters and the mansions, to the projects and the gated communities.

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Reach out your arms to gather in the little ones and the not-so-little, the vulnerable and the ones who think they have to do it all on their own.

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Remember that we are one HUGE family!!!

How good and pleasant it is for Christians to live together in unity!

Adapted from Safiyah Fosua, *The Africana Worship Book, Year B* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 237.

Prayers of the People

This prayer includes the option to sing verses of O-So-So (The Faith We Sing, 2232) between petitions. You are invited to sing the verses in Korean or English, or to use only the spoken portions of the prayer. Sung portions are in italics and spoken portions are in regular or boldface type. If you are interested in singing the Korean text, [here is a sample recording](#)..

*O-so-so o-so-so,
pyonghwa eui imgum
uriga hanmom
iruge hasoso.*

*Come now, O Prince of Peace
make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus;
reconcile your people.*

Peacemaking God, we pray for the peace of our world. A day does not go by when somewhere in the world Christians gather to eat, pray, serve, and worship you as a community. Whether it's around an altar or a kitchen table, your people gather as one Body in Christ. And yet, we know for many, those gatherings happen amidst war, famine, weather crises, political unrest, and communal fracturing. And so, we lift our siblings around the world, our communities, and all of creation to you, and we cry out for your peace to reign among us.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

*O-so-so o-so-so,
sarang eui imgum
uriga hanmom
iruge hasoso.*

*Come now, O God of love,
make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus;
reconcile your people.*

Loving God, we pray for the well-being of your creation. The lands are parched or flooded, the air is thick with imbalance, the waters are warming and rising. We have neglected our role as stewards of creation, and we feel powerless to make a difference. And so, we lift the earth to you, and we cry out for your love to inspire and empower us to tend your creation, our home.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

*O-so-so o-so-so,
chayu eui imgum
uriga hanmom
iruge hasoso.*

*Come now and set us free,
O God our Savior..
Come, O Lord Jesus;
reconcile all nations.*

Saving God, we pray for the liberation of all who are oppressed. Around the world, people are enslaved and trafficked, exploited for the gain of others. Laborers are underpaid and overworked to feed a bottom line they will never benefit from. People fear for their lives and well-being because of the color of their skin, the sound of their accent, their religious beliefs, or their address. And so, we lift the least and the last to you, and we cry out for your salvation to pour out of our hands and into all corners of the globe to free the oppressed and the forgotten.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

*O-so-so o-so-so,
tongil eui imgum,
uriga hanmom
iruge hasoso.*

*Come Hope of unity,
make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus;
reconcile all nations.*

Hope-bringing God, we pray for unity throughout creation. Where divisions reign, bring reconciliation. Where distrust has taken root, show us how to till the ground with mercy and grace. Where racism, patriarchy, classism, ableism, and homophobia tear us apart, sew us back together with your love as we

seek forgiveness, accountability, and reconciliation together. Guide us, O God, as we lift ourselves, our community, and our world to you.
God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

*O-so-so o-so-so,
pyonghwa eui imgum
uriga hanmom
iruge hasoso.*

*Come now, O Prince of Peace
make us one body.
Come, O Lord Jesus;
reconcile your people.*

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Prayer of Confession

Great indeed is the faithfulness of God, and yet our hearts are not so reliable. We wander. We argue. We forget. We divide ourselves with anger and bitterness and falsehood. Let's try to come back together again, and let's start with the truth. Let's confess our sins, to God, and also, to each other.

Almighty God, mother of mercy, father of grace: You have called us to one table, but we have pursued our own course. You have promised us the abundance of all creation, but in our greed, and in our envy, the world goes without. You have promised us the bread of life itself, but in our pride, and in our arrogance, the world goes hungry. You have promised us the waters of peace and justice, but in our violence, and in our discord, the world goes thirsty. And now we are famished, too, Lord. Have mercy on us. Forgive us, again. Transform us, at this table, and for this table, and send us from this table as servants of your righteousness, by the power of your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Even when our cups run dry, God's grace overflows. Even when our plates are empty, God's generosity overflows. And even when our hearts feel barren, God's love overflows. Friends, you have been called and claimed by the God of all things, and by the abundance of God's grace, and by the power of God's love, your sins have been forgiven. Go in peace. Amen.

Written by Matt Gaventa, "PC (USA) World Communion Sunday Liturgy," Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2016, page 2, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/PGW16-World-Communion-Sunday-Worship-resource.pdf>.

Benediction

Go in peace, love and care for one another in Christ's name,
Go in the confidence of people who have found mercy through him,
keeping the commandments
and letting go of all that binds you to the ways of this world,

And may God come close to you and keep you safe;
may Christ Jesus reward your faithfulness a hundredfold;
and may the Holy Spirit be your help in time of need.
both now and forevermore. Amen.

From the *Voices United* hymnal. Posted on Rev. Richard Fairchild's Kirshalom website. <http://www.rockies.net/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/10/benediction-go-in-peace.html>.

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 13, 2024

Needles and Camels

PLANNING NOTES

For those of us who are focused on stewardship this month, today's [Gospel reading](#) offers a lot of potential...potential for engagement, potential for exploring the meaning of generosity, and the potential for tying ourselves up in interpretive and linguistic knots! I mean, Jesus doesn't tell the rich man to give his money to the church, does he? Nevertheless, this second encounter in our walk with Jesus presents us with an opportunity to wrestle with the complicated relationship we have with wealth in meaningful and life-giving ways.

Reflect for a moment on the sermons and teachings you've received about this text in the past. Was it used to condemn and even shame people with wealth? Was it used to promote certain attitudes about having money? How did those teachings align with other lessons you received about stewardship in the church? It is important with a familiar text like this one to assess the way we've received it in the past and discern whether those are the lessons we want to convey in worship or not. It is also important to recognize that people bring various understandings of this text with them into worship, so we need to be clear and intentional about what we are trying to communicate, especially if we are offering a new approach to a well-known text.

Perhaps one of the underlying messages in this text is the pull money can have in our lives and the need to resist and release that pull to use money as one of many resources that can further God's work in the world. Money is a tool, not an end in itself. Consider, then, what aspects of worship might help people resist, release, and reorient their relationship with God and money. Perhaps we need to take time to confess the ways that our approaches to money and our faith have been at odds with one another. We may need to take some time to discern and name the vast spiritual gifts and assets in the congregation that have nothing to do with money. What might it look like to pray for the church to live into God's abundance instead of the world's scarcity? How might you name all the ways Jesus has looked at the community with love, despite its struggles to live in God's economy instead of society's economy? There are many opportunities today to not only teach a new thing but also to enact a new thing in the community as we let go of the weight of stuff so that we can use what we have to further God's beautiful purposes in the world.

PREACHING NOTES

Like many of you, I found myself caring for my parents in the last years of their lives. Some of that caring was difficult and heartbreaking. Some of it was just annoying, for them and for me. I had to help them navigate changes in technology and communication. They managed, but my dad especially struggled with some of those changes. He did pretty well, but what rankled him the most was that he was no longer in charge--of his schedule, his decisions, his choices, his life. And that didn't make him happy.

That is understandable. We all want to be king of our own kingdom, at least. Of our own stuff. That's one of the reasons why stuff appeals. It gives us the illusion of control, of being able to define our own existence, of having the power to shape the world to our design. And if not this latest thing, then the next thing. That gadget, the upgrade, the bells and whistles will make it all happen.

In his book, *The Generous Church*, Bishop Tom Berlin called that pull of the stuff in our lives gravity. Is it stewardship time in your church? That's an important and somewhat delicate time. But stewardship is more than just meeting the church budget. It always has been. It's a spiritual issue. Jesus thought it was important. The two things he talked most about were the kingdom of God and money. That's funny, given what we spend our time debating. But for Jesus, the effect of money, of riches, of stuff is potentially so dangerous, so destructive, so antithetical to faith that he spent a lot of time warning us. "Pay attention," he says, "to the gravity of wealth."

"He went away grieving," this rich young man who rushed up to Jesus for affirmation and approval. At least that's what it seems like was going on here. He wanted Jesus to say, "You're doing great; just keep plugging away." But instead, he got bad news, a warning. And he went away grieving. The pull of the gravity of his stuff was too great. He couldn't break away. He was offered a place in the pantheon of heroes we call apostles. "Come and follow me." He had an invitation to the greatest party on earth. And the burden of what he owned made him walk away. But did you notice a small detail in Mark's telling of this story, one that we often overlook? Matthew leaves it out of his version of this event. But Mark says, after the young man replies, "I've kept these commandments all my life," that Jesus looks at him and loves him. Then he says there is one thing the man lacks, to go and sell and follow me.

He loves him. That's why he wants to help him. That's why the young man's pain is important to Jesus. Because he loved him. It does, however, make us wonder why Jesus seemed so adversarial at the beginning of the conversation. What was all that "Why do you call me good" stuff about? If there is anyone who we can be certain was good, it had to be Jesus, right? Was he just trying to get the young man on edge? Make him defensive from the beginning? That doesn't seem to jibe with the statement that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Maybe it wasn't a test; maybe it was a hint. Maybe Jesus, who elsewhere in Mark seems to want to hide his true identity, wanted this one to know something about the one he came to question. Maybe it was his love for this man who was obviously burdened in ways that most folks would never have seen that brought Jesus to the place of dropping a hint about the closeness of the eternity he was seeking. Maybe it was an invitation into a relationship of love and kingdom.

What a difference that would make if we approached those who are lost, who are hurting, who are burdened by an unsustainable life with love and not judgment. Or maybe it was that Jesus knew that the only thing that could overcome the gravity of the riches of this life is a force stronger, a greater pull. Love redeems; love rescues; love wins. He knew that. He knows that. He loved him even though it didn't seem to work. The young man walked away, grieving. The burden on his heart increased, instead of lightened. He had the antidote; he had the prescription. But the medicine was too bitter for him to swallow.

Good thing we know better, right? Good thing we aren't sucked in the ownership cycle. The wanting of stuff. We're smarter than that. Aren't we? How do you feel about your stuff? Especially the "essential stuff, like your phone. I enjoy my phone, and at times panic when I forget it, thinking I can't live without it. That little clutch in my chest I feel when I drop it is the effect of gravity. The pull of something that shouldn't matter all that much. But no one can deny that we all feel the effect of the weight of our stuff. I

suspect I would have walked away from Jesus grieving if he had said the same thing to me. Luckily, he didn't.

Or did he? If you keep reading our text for this week, you'll find the seriousness of the weight of wealth. That's where we get contortionist camels and impossible entrances. We can explain all this away if we want, but it's better to leave it as the challenge that it is. And then to go on and hear the blessing of a God who makes the impossible possible. That's where we get the generosity of the kingdom that clashes against the generosity of this world. Here, we want fair. But there, in God's kingdom, we get grace enough.

Jesus wants us to have grace enough--enough to float free from all that encumbers us, all that weighs us down. Jesus wants us to leave our kingdoms behind, leave behind the desire to be king of that kingdom and enter into his kingdom, where we will know riches beyond imagining, where we will know grace enough.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

We gather to listen to the voice of Jesus say, "Come, follow me!" But will you follow when Jesus also calls you to release the hold wealth has on you?

We want to follow Jesus anywhere he leads, and we can with God's help.

We gather to remember all that God has taught us through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. But what about when we have to put what we know into action?

We want to put our faith into action, and we can with God's help.

We gather to live into God's economy of abundance, recognizing the riches of the prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness that surround us. But what about when the world tempts us back into scarcity?

We want to turn away from scarcity and choose God's abundance, and we can with God's help.

We gather to shine as a beacon of a new way of living where following Jesus means sharing in God's abundant gifts together. But will you keep shining when others try to pull you astray, putting the pursuit of wealth before the pursuit of God?

With God's help, we will resist the pull of wealth and the fear of scarcity and pursue the way of love, abundance, and flourishing for all creation. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Pastoral Prayer

God of infinite patience and wisdom, we come to you with so many things that claim our time, our energy, our resources, our very lives. We are easily drawn away from serving you by the enticements of the world for wealth, ease, and comfort. Just like the young man in the scriptures, we are owned by our possessions, held captive by our treasures. You continue to offer to us healing and hope. You seek to transform our lives from captivity to freedom in witness and service. We look at the world in which there

is so very much warfare and strife, anger and hatred, and we easily become overwhelmed by the needs and the stresses. Help us to place our lives and our trust in you, knowing that with your help, many wonderful things can be accomplished which will provide hope and peace for others and ourselves. Give us courage and strength to truly be your disciples. For we ask this in Jesus' Name. **Amen.**

Written by Nancy C. Townley on the Ministry Matters website. <http://www.ministrymatters.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/10/pastoral-prayer-mark-10.html>.

Prayer of Confession

God of grace: we offer you our lives. We confess we are often stingy in our gifts of time, of talents, of treasures. We confess our addiction to the drugs of consumerism and that, as your church, we have often fallen headlong into the culture's seduction. Forgive us and free us to joyful simplicity, that we may be signs of grace to your world. Amen.

Written by Valerie Bridgeman Davis, *The Africana Worship Book, Year B* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 163.

Benediction

May God bless you with courage to turn from the riches the world values, trust to choose God's economy over the world's economy, and opportunities to discover God's abundance over and over and over again. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

October 20, 2024

Not to Be Served

PLANNING NOTES

Have you tried the practice where you read a story in the Bible and notice which character resonates with you? I must confess, I would not want to do that practice with today's text ([Mark 10:35-45](#)). I do not want to entertain the idea that I might share some similarities with James and John. None of us wants to admit that we, too, might be seeking notoriety and power, especially with such bald ambition. Yet, there is something entirely understandable about this episode in our walk with Jesus that, despite my resistance, I can't help but feel for them. And it seems that Jesus does too.

When we gather for worship, we are so very similar to the disciples. There are some of us searching for our place with ambition and enthusiasm that may (or may not!) be a little misguided or misplaced. Others are waiting on the sidelines, longing for someone to invite them to step into their role and find their place in the community. Conflict may be simmering under the surface as people misunderstand and

misinterpret one another. This is what happens sometimes when we humans get together. How, then, can worship help us recognize that we're all searching for the same thing—a place to belong?

Jesus, as usual, gives us a good place to start. We serve. We realign ourselves toward service with one another, our community, and our world. Not “I’m going to burn out because I’m the only one who shows up” service. No, this is service in partnership with one another and God, service that values one another and the gifts we bring, service that is sustainable through the ebbs and flows of our lives because we do it *together*. So, take some time today to highlight areas of service in your congregation. Who can speak to life-giving partnerships of service in your church? Remember, these don’t have to be big projects. Sometimes the most meaningful witnesses are to the everyday moments of Christians living in Spirit-filled community with one another. This may be the time to consider new areas of service in the community that fit with the assets and spiritual gifts in the congregation. How do the gifts of your church fit the needs of your neighborhood? Maybe today isn’t a day for answering that question but for asking and listening as God guides the imagination and creativity of your congregation as you explore new opportunities. On this leg of the journey with Jesus, take the time to pray and celebrate the ways God is already at work and will continue to work among you!

PREACHING NOTES

Please tell me this didn’t happen like this. Surely this is one of those examples of editorial compression, of taking something that happened at another time and slipping it in here to make some sort of larger point. This story is bad enough on its own. But as Mark places it in the narrative, James and John come off as the dictionary definition of crass.

We skipped a few verses in our walk through the tenth chapter of Mark’s gospel. Last week, we finished Jesus’s teaching about the dangers of riches with the familiar line – “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Mark 10:31). We start this passage with James and John oiling up to Jesus with their painfully selfish request. In between, we have Jesus baring his soul. I realize that this isn’t the text for the week but take a moment and reflect on these words. You can’t help but read the gospel lesson in a different light if you do. There’s a lot going on in these three skipped verses, and we shouldn’t take too much time. But why were they amazed and why were they afraid (Mk 10:32)? And who exactly was amazed or afraid? And why did Jesus think telling them about his upcoming death was going to help them with their fear or amazement?

Too much to unpack. But after all that, we have James and John. It just feels icky that after Jesus talks about being mocked and spit upon and flogged and killed that James and John sneak up and say, “Give us the best seats in the house!” They did it on the sly, you notice. Mark says, “When the ten heard this,” they blew a gasket. So, James and John snuck around and asked Jesus this when the others weren’t listening. Maybe they’d wandered off after Jesus talked about going to Jerusalem to die, and the sons of thunder seized their moment and grabbed Jesus. They started with, “We want you to do whatever we ask.” Maybe it reads better in Greek, or maybe the original Aramaic doesn’t sound so smarmy. This is just an ugly moment for two members of the inner circle of disciples.

Except that Jesus doesn’t take it that way. With what seems infinite patience, he explains to them what’s involved here. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” he says to them. Weren’t you listening? Well, apparently, they were, because when Jesus itemizes the route to his ascension, they nod their heads with enthusiasm and say, “Yep, we can do it!” “Are you able,” he asks. “Yes, we are able,” they replied, and then proceeded to write a hymn about it.

Here's the amazing bit. Jesus agrees with them. Wait, what? Go ahead, look at verse 39, after their foolish declaration. Jesus says, "Yeah you will." Whether he means the inevitability of persecution that will fall on them all, or he sees something of significance in the two of them who will be part of a movement that changes the world, it is hard to say in this moment. But Jesus treats them with more kindness than most of us would have in that less than stellar moment.

I guess that is part of the good news here. James and John aren't the only ones who want to put themselves higher than they should. It is a cultural blindness for many of us. We're surrounded by messages telling us to dream big and reach for the stars. In and of itself, that's not a bad thing at all. But it sometimes leads to finding shortcuts that do damage to ourselves or those around us. There's a reason why Paul was so big on humility in many of his letters. But if Jesus can be patient with these two, maybe we have a chance as well.

When the incident blows up into the rest of the group, Jesus calms the waters with a lesson on what it means to lead. He says we can look around and see all kinds of authority, many ways of wielding power. But that's not how we function. That's not the model we follow. Instead, I'm showing you what it means to wield ultimate power. We do it by setting ourselves aside. We do it by serving. Not serving to climb a ladder, however, but serving to serve—even to the point of giving our lives away. He comes back to what he was trying to get them to understand before James and John interrupted him. "Service isn't a strategy," he says. It is not a means of getting to the top, of achieving a personal goal. Instead, it is a way of being. Service is a way of living.

Maybe James and John helped him make this point. So, perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on them. We need a few good bad examples, some might say. Or maybe our example should be the one who didn't come to serve but who gave his life so that we might have life.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Welcome all who long to encounter Jesus, the one who loves, tends, sustains, and saves us.

Jesus said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Welcome all who walk the halls of power, who feel pushed and pulled to fight for position, status, and authority.

Jesus said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Welcome all who feel burned out, who have given more than they have day in and day out and long for someone to notice that you, too, need help and support.

Jesus said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Welcome, followers of Christ, who came to serve and show God's abundant love and grace among us.

We come to worship Jesus who shows us that serving is the fruit of our love and being served by one another is the source of our power as the Body of Christ. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Opening Prayer

Though you are God,
with all the influence and status that the name implies,
you refused to pull rank,
and parade your power among us.

Instead, you chose to step down into our experience,
living among us, as one of us,
with all the struggle and suffering
that goes with being human.

More than that, you adopted the role of servant,
washing feet, serving people of no reputation or social standing,
and giving of yourself completely.

As incredible as it sounds,
you are the God who serves,
and we can respond in no other way
than to give ourselves to you in praise.

Amen.

Adapted from by John van de Laar, and posted on the Sacredise.com website. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/10/prayer-god-who-saves.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, we confess that too often we clamor for attention. Me! Me! Look at how important *I* am. That's what our actions say. Like James and John, we pray selfish prayers, for power, for position, for prestige—for what? So that people will say how great we are? Teach us that true greatness comes from humble service. Show us how to roll up our sleeves, dig in, and lend a hand; even when no one else will. Preoccupy us with humility, then greatness can come when we least expect it. Give us the grace to live as humble servants. Amen.

Written by Kwasi I. Kena, *The Africana Worship Book, Year B* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 162.

Benediction

Beloved, go today in the blessing of Jesus Christ, who challenges us to share our love through service and receive love through the service others, binding us together as a community through holy interdependence. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

October 27, 2024

Let Me See

PLANNING NOTES

Have you ever walked through your neighborhood with someone who has never been there before? If not, try it sometime. It's amazing what a new person will notice about your street that you just don't pay attention to anymore. Perhaps that's a bit like how the crowd felt when Jesus stopped and responded to Bartimaeus in today's text ([Mark 10:46-52](#)). Had the crowds gotten so used to Bartimaeus's shouting that they'd neglected to actually pay attention to what he was saying? How many times had he called out for mercy, only to have his neighbors treat him as one more ignorable fixture in their lives? Now, maybe that's not fair. Or, not entirely fair. Sometimes we choose not to pay attention because we feel helpless to do anything. Noticing would require us to do something. But whether your congregants are more like the crowd or more like Bartimaeus—or perhaps a mixture of the two—there's a good chance they're coming to worship this Sunday struggling to see and feel seen, hear and be heard, know and feel known.

Before we go further, let me clear that this text is not about physical blindness being a result of sin, nor is it a lesson in salvation as the restoration of physical sight. For centuries, Christians have failed to pay attention to our disabled siblings and the harm that equating disability with sin and salvation with the removal of disability has done. If you would like to learn more, the article "[Finding Healing in My Disability](#)" is an excellent and accessible starting place.

So, how do we help our people notice what Jesus notices? Consider filling the altar and/or the screens with images from around the church building and the surrounding neighborhood that can serve as icons for meditation and prayer. Perhaps a small ensemble could sing a song usually considered "secular" that gains new and deeper meaning when put it in the context of the sacred. If it's not too hot or cold, consider opening some windows or doors, letting in the fresh air and the sounds of the neighborhood to mix and mingle with the sounds and activities of worship. Confess and commit to recognizing the areas of need and the people crying out for mercy who have been ignored for too long. When we gather for worship, Jesus pays attention and asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?" May our answer lead us into greater connection and transformative relationships with God, self, neighbor, and creation.

PREACHING NOTES

They told him to be quiet. They told him to keep to the margins, to stay away, to not interrupt. But he kept on shouting. Now here is the amazing part: Jesus asked him what he wanted. I know, you're thinking, what is so amazing about that? He was shouting for attention. Of course, he is going to know what he wanted. But I have found that isn't always true. Sometimes the loudest shouters don't really know what they want. They only know that they aren't happy, or aren't getting their way, or are forced into some change, some position that they don't want. So, they may be able to answer Jesus if he asks them, "What don't you want?" Or "Why are you unhappy?" But Jesus doesn't tend to ask what is wrong; he asks what would make it right? What do you want me to do for you?

Bartimaeus didn't hesitate. Let me see again. Not, solve all my problems, or make bad things or bad people go away. Let me see again. Then from there, I'll follow you. From there, I'll let your will become my will as I daily search out the path that you would have me walk. Let me see again, so that I can be

about the business of opening eyes to who you are and what you have to offer this world that clings to its blindness. Let me see again, so that I can find you whenever I need to.

We've been walking with Jesus through the tenth chapter of Mark. And now we're at the end, watching blind Bartimaeus receive his sight. And we wonder what we've missed along the way. Would we have been among the hushers when the beggar at the gates of Jericho started shouting that day? Or would we have seen him as Jesus saw him? Not as a problem to be solved or an issue to be debated, but as a man with agency, with the ability to decide and determine and choose.

"Let me see," Bartimaeus declares that sunny day outside the walls of Jericho. Maybe that should be our cry too. Our prayer and our hope. Maybe that should be our spiritual discipline this fall. Take a walk around the neighborhood where your church sits. What do you see? What draws your attention? What shouts to you as you pass? Let Jesus open your eyes to the familiar and maybe see it a whole new way.

Look at your building. Sure, it is familiar and welcoming to you and yours. But is it accessible to all? Is there an invitation in the art and the color and look and the feel of the place? Is there something that speaks not only of your story and your faith, but something that looks familiar to the community around you? Does the face of Jesus that you project resemble you or them or both?

It comes down to whether we are among those who are telling the outsider, the stranger, the marginalized to be quiet and not disturb the status quo, or whether we choose to be those who say, "Take heart, he is calling you." Take heart, this message is for you. This hope is for you, and not just for us. Sure, we have blindnesses that need to be healed as well. Yes, we need to hear the voice of Jesus calling us and asking us what we need. We are a part of those to whom Jesus has come. But we often – knowingly or unknowingly – hoard that message, that voice, that partner with whom we walk as though he were our special possession and not the one who came to the whole world. Like James and John in last week's text, we want to claim places of honor as our right.

What walking with Jesus teaches us is that we aren't the ones guiding the path. We aren't the ones who are determining where to go. We've surrendered that responsibility when we decided to follow him. Bartimaeus saw that. We could learn from one who was blind but now sees. Because he asked. *Let me see.*

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

One voice: Jesus is in our midst. Jesus, our healer, deliverer, and friend, is here.

Many voices: We have heard so many good things about him, but we long to meet him, to encounter him ourselves.

One voice: Call out to him, and do not be silent. Like Bartimaeus, shout to him and do not allow anyone to silence your voice. Cry out and tell Jesus what you need!

Many voices: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us! We need a touch from you! Touch me; touch us in our need, which we lift right now in our hearts!

One Voice: In this time of worship, celebrate God's goodness! In this time celebration of worship, know that Jesus touched your place of need. Hallelujah! Amen!

Adapted from Lillian C. Smith, *The Africana Worship Book, Year B* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 72.

Prayer for the Day

Lord God, our Provider.

We worship you as the one who meets our needs,
who grants our daily bread,
who restores our humanity.

We worship you as the God who knows human need from experience,
who knows want, and thirst and humiliation.

And we worship you as your people,
in a world where wealth is mixed with poverty;
where we have all we need, but don't know how to share.
Where want, and hunger and thirst and humiliation are hidden
from those with the power to offer challenge and bring change.

So, open our hearts.
Not only that we learn sad facts about the world.
But that we may feel our place in this world, as your people.
Where there is need,
teach us to learn where our wealth lies and help us to give.
Where there is injustice,
teach us to learn the causes and help us to fight.
Where there is brokenness,
teach us to learn of our own brokenness and help us to bring wholeness.

Help us to look to you,
that we neither remain ignorant of the world,
nor lose ourselves in despair at its brokenness.

Show us how to worship you,
the crucified God,
the risen God,
the God who provides.

Help us to carry our cross,
to accept your gift of new life,
to bring that gift to others.

Adapted from the **Baptist Union of Great Britain** website. <http://www.baptist.org.uk/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/09/prayer-open-our-eyes.html>.

Prayer of Confession

When we want to be a church ever-reforming,
yet cling to comfortable ways:

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!

When we want to honor your “still speaking voice,”
but are fearful of insights which challenge old assumptions:

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!

When we want to live into Jesus’ dream of oneness,
but fail to listen to voices of difference:

Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!

Words of Assurance

Take heart, get up; Jesus is calling to us!

We trust in the one who has guided the church for two millennia.

Through Christ, God forgives us our failings,
and continues to call us into a community of mutual love and forgiveness.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

Glory to God! Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Bonnie Tarwater, posted on the United Church of Christ’s **Worship Ways** website.

<http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/10/prayer-of-confession-have-mercy.html>.

Benediction

Beloved, go now in the blessing of Christ’s mercy. May God grant you persistence to cry out for help, an open heart to notice the cries of others, and the courage to listen and lend a loving hand to neighbors known and unknown. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.