

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 21, 2018

Jesus and the Moral Imagination

Mark 10:35-45; Job 38:1-11, 34-38

The title of the sermon today says everything about the sermon,
and at the same time says nothing about the sermon.
That is because almost every sermon ever preached on the teachings of Jesus
could be entitled "Jesus and the Moral Imagination."

Jesus, in all that he says and does and endures,
seeks to inspire us to imagine a world
and to imagine our lives in the world
that embody a moral vision that expresses the profound truth
that we are made in the image of God.

I considered giving this sermon a title
that reflects more literally what this particular passage is actually about.
I considered entitling the sermon
"Jesus on Being Great, Again"
That is, "Jesus-on-Being-Great-COMMA-Again"
because, yes, once again in the Gospel of Mark,
Jesus is responding to the disciples
about their obsession with being great.

If the Gospel of Mark is starting to sound like a broken record,
well, don't blame Mark— let alone Jesus—
The disciples ARE a broken record.

It would be almost comical
if it weren't so completely realistic,
and so fully symptomatic of the sinful human condition,
and so utterly descriptive of our modern malaise in Western culture,
and in a particularly insidious way
in America at the moment.

It would be almost comical
if it were just James and John being buffoons,
being utterly clueless of the fact that they are showing out
their deep-seeded, self-aggrandizing narcissism.
They seem to be unaware of just how stupidly obvious they are.

But yes, once again,
James and John come to Jesus to make a special request for themselves:
"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."
And Jesus says to them,
"What is it you want me to do for you?"
And they reply,
"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Jesus has come onto the scene
to do the work of redeeming a world of sinful, broken, and suffering humanity,
and to break the shackles of oppressive religious structures,
and in his life to show the truth of God's life-giving reign
in the face of the powers of death embodied in the Roman empire,
and yet, for all his miraculous and revelatory work,
all these disciples seem to be able to do, day after day, time and again,
is to turn the attention back to themselves.
They said to him — they really said to him —
"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

As we have observed previously,
the pattern repeats itself more than a few times in Mark's gospel:

1. Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem,
predicts his suffering and death at the hands of those in power.
2. His disciples incessantly fail to understand him
because they do not want to understand him.
3. Jesus then corrects his disciples
by teaching them what it means to be his disciples.

Just a few verses ago in the previous chapter,
just after Jesus second prediction of his passion,
the disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest,
to which Jesus responded by taking a child in his lap
and talking about becoming childlike.

In this case, just after Jesus third prediction of his passion,
James and John have tried to edge the other disciples out
by asking Jesus directly to be made the greatest.

And so, in response
in that third part of the pattern — Jesus' teaching about discipleship —
we hear again Jesus' words about *being great*.

So Jesus called them and said to them,
*"You know that among the Gentiles
those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them,
and their great ones are tyrants over them."*

These are interesting words that Jesus uses to describe Gentile *greatness*:

Rulers — *archein*, literally, *the first ones*, in the Greek

Lord it over — *katakurieou*, literally, *to overpower*, with the prefix *kata* meaning "down,"
as in "to press down"

Great ones — *megaloi*, from which we get our english "mega," as in "megalomaniac."

Tyrants — another *kata* prefix, *kataexousia*, literally *to exert authority downward,
to strongly dominate*.

We have other English words for this kind of greatness today.

Words like Dictator or Autocrat —

an *autocracy* is a form of government

in which supreme power is concentrated in the hands of one ruler

whose decisions are subject to neither legal restraint nor popular control.

Examples today are familiar,

the *absolute monarchy* of, say, Saudi Arabia,

or the *dictatorship* of, say, North Korea.

And we have plenty of knowledge of the atrocities carried out
by those particular tyrants.

Certainly, in Jesus day, the Caesars of the Roman Empire and their local appointees
immediately would have come to mind.

The moral vision of a tyrant is to hold absolute power,

to be strong enough, powerful enough, to dominate your fellow human beings,

to press down anyone who would criticize or try to stand against you.

Apparently, James and John were salivating at the thought

of holding this kind of power along with Jesus,

and they wanted to be as close to the top of the heap as they could get,

so that they could do the pressing down,

rather than being pressed down upon.

But, Jesus says,

it is not so among you [my disciples]

but whoever wishes to become great among you

must be your servant,

and whoever wishes to be first among you

must be slave of all.

Jesus upends the world's understanding of power and authority and greatness.

To be great is to willingly put yourself with those at the bottom of the heap.

If we truly believe that Jesus is God incarnate

then we have to understand that when God comes into the world,

this is where God goes.

Not to hang around in the halls of power,

but to stand with those who are pressed down upon by those powers.

Jesus turns upside down the morality James and John have been living by.

He disorients their orientation to power.

He calls them to imagine a world in which the **greatness of the human spirit**

is perceived in a **willingness to serve, and to give, and to humble oneself.**

As the one who might have come in glory to amass followers in a violent takeover,

Jesus chooses instead to give up his life

in a peaceful resistance to the megalomaniacs of the world.

And so Jesus inspires the moral imagination in a new direction,

in a powerfully counter-cultural direction,

counter-cultural then in the Roman Empires,

and most definitely counter-cultural these days in America.

You know, in a way I feel badly for James and John and the other disciples.
Because I can feel their disappointment.
It is not like they don't have a strong claim against injustice.
They have suffered the oppression of the religious elites.
They have suffered under the policies of the conquering Roman Empire.
It would be sweet revenge to see the tables turned in the other direction.
It would be sweet vindication to have God come onto the scene
and prove them to be in the right.

In a way, they could be like Job
making his case to his wife, to his friends, and even to the empty air,
that if only God would show up,
God would surely exalt Job and announce that Job is in the right.

Isn't that what we all want?
For God to show up and elevate us and say to our family and friends,
but even more to our enemies and oppressors
he is right, she is right.
What glory that would be!
to be elevated by the hand of God
so the whole world can see that you are right and good.

Well...God does show up in the 38th chapter of Job,
but not only does God not vindicate Job's legal claims,
God does not even so much as respond to Job's legal claims.
He ignores them.

God simply reminds Job
that Job is not God,
and since Job is merely human,
Job must trust God to be God and to do what God will do
even when Job can't make heads or tails
of God's up and God's down.

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements--surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

So whether we are like Job,
thinking we know all about what is right and what is wrong,
or whether we are like James and John,
thinking we deserve all power and glory,
we might ought to be ready to have our world upended.
We do not have all the knowledge and we are not worthy of all the power,
and anyone who thinks they do or they are
is perfectly positioned for a fall.
And a fall is perhaps the best thing that can happen for the overconfident.
It may be the only way for us to see our need
to be helped back up
and to be set once again on the path of life

by the only one who can set us there,
by the only one who can redeem us
from our delusions of grandeur.

Jesus asks,

*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,
or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"*

The moral life Jesus is living will not bring him to power,
it will not establish him as absolute monarch in any earthly sense —
not in Rome, not even in Jerusalem.

The moral life Jesus is living will not save him from suffering,
and he will not be vindicated at any point
before he dies gruesomely on a Roman cross,
where there will be two men, on his right and his left,
but they will be common criminals, bandits, armed robbers.

The great disconnect of this final scene of Jesus' earthly life
is meant to disorient our way of seeing the world,
it is meant to shake up our values,
and inspire us to imagine life lived according to a new vision,
in which we renounce dominance
and choose service instead.

*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life a ransom for many.*
that is, to give his life so that other might be set free.

You know, it may just be the case that

*"The great contest...is not for human economic interests,
or human political preferences, or even for human minds—not at the bottom..."*¹

It may be that

*"the true battle is being fought in the ... human imagination."*²

It could be said that imagination rules the world.

Imagination: the ability to perceive in the mind what is really going on.

When you wake up in the morning,
who inspires *your* moral imagination?

When you look out at the world of human striving and suffering
to whom do *you* look for your vision of a life worth living?

How do you want your life to be defined?

As one who sought, above all else, to assert your own greatness and glory?

Or your family's greatness?
Or your party's greatness?
Or your country's greatness?

Or as one who sought, first of all,
to serve your brothers and sisters?

The way we answer that question
will determine the path we will walk.

The way we answer that question
will define the life we will live,
and perhaps the death we must die.
Who knows?

May God grant us the moral vision...

...to perceive the way of Jesus before us,

...and may God grant us the moral courage

...to choose it.

¹ Russell Kirk, quoted in Gleaves Whitney, "The Swords of Imagination: Russell Kirk's Battle with Modernity," in *The Imaginative Conservative*. April 11, 2016.

² Ibid