

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
October 18, 2009
Mark 10:32-45
“Downward Mobility”

There's a lot that happens in this passage from Mark. Jesus makes a prediction about his coming trials and death. James and John make an inappropriate request of Jesus, and then the other disciples become jealous and angry. But if we discuss these verses in the order in which the events occur, we'll miss the entire point of the passage. To understand this scripture, I need to talk about one word from the very end of the passage – and that word is “ransom.”

What is a ransom? In modern parlance it means the money paid to kidnappers to gain a captured victim's release. It's not a very pleasant word, linked as it is with images of taking people hostage and forcing families to pay exorbitant sums for their freedom. But back in the first century A.D., when Jesus used the word, “ransom” meant something different – something more positive. In those days, people captured in times of war were commonly made into slaves. And people who couldn't pay their debts were forced into indentured servitude, made into economic slaves. However, if you paid a set amount of money, a ransom as it were, you could gain the release of these political and economic slaves. You could set them free.

Jesus said, “The Son of Man...gave his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus' life, death, and resurrection serves as a ransom that wins release from captivity for you and me and literally millions of people trapped in slavery. People without hope are now given hope. People trapped in prisons of doubt and fear discover the prison doors have been unlocked and they can walk into the light, free at last. People trying (and failing) to do everything by themselves are now set free to live by God's grace, which alone offers true life in abundance. Like the Exodus from Egyptian slavery long ago, Jesus is the new Moses, the Savior who pays the debt, unlocks the shackles of slavery, and leads us into a new and vibrant life. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us.

Hold on to that thought while I come at this topic from another angle. We've mentioned how inside your bulletins are large postcards that can be addressed and given to people to invite them to join us next week for Visitors Sunday. Now ask yourself an honest question: Why do we want to people to visit and perhaps join our church? Think about this quite seriously. Do we encourage this so that our membership numbers will grow? Yes and No. You can have the largest congregation in town and still utterly fail to be a true church of Jesus Christ. Believing that church success can be measured by numbers and statistics is to miss the point of the gospel. Remember: Jesus said “Feed my sheep, not count my sheep.”

Why do we want people to join our church? For one simple reason: so that they can move from lives of captivity, stress and fear into lives redirected by the example and grace of Jesus Christ. That's true for every one of us here today and anyone new that might be with us next Sunday. The question to ask yourself is not, Who do I know who

is searching for a church to attend on Sunday mornings? The question is, Who do I know whose daily life is marked more by stress than by peace, more by anxiety than hope, more by tears and fears than by trust and faith? Did anyone's face come to mind when I mentioned those categories: stress, not peace; anxiety, not hope; fear, not faith? That's the person you need to give the invitation card.

Imagine that friend or family member right beside you now as we hear what Jesus says to each of us today through this mini-drama involving the sons of Zebedee. Dialogue #1: James and John, like nervous schoolboys, pull their teacher aside and ask him to do them a favor and let them sit at his right and left side when he attains his full glory. They were among Jesus' earliest disciples, leaving behind their fishing nets to become fishers of people. Were they feeling ambitious, hoping to secure a place of prominence over the other disciples? Probably. Were they feeling a bit anxious, wanting some promise of job security given the fact that Jesus had just spoken about being arrested, flogged, and killed by the authorities? More than likely. But when Jesus heard this request, he didn't get angry. The first words out of his mouth were these: "You don't know what you are asking." James, John, you don't understand.

Preacher Jana Childers has said that we all have Zebedee DNA in our genes. There are lots of things we wish for that we don't talk about out loud. But if the chance came to pull Jesus aside and put in a plug for our private wish list, we'd be right there beside James and John, saying: Jesus, help me out. Put my family first. Pull some strings for me. Think about a friend or family member whose life is marred by stress and unease right now. What are your options? You could buy them a book from the self-help section in Barnes & Noble. You could tell them to take some time off, or help them clean up their résumé so they could find a better job if possible. Or you could bring them here, where there's prayer and holiness and Jesus saying "You don't know what you're asking. You don't yet understand. Look at me; let me show you a better way."

Dialogue #2: The other disciples hear about the Zebedee boys' request. They get angry and jealous and Jesus has to intervene again. And what does he say this time? "You all know people who lord their power over others. It is not to be so among you." You are not to be like that. The world in Jesus' day and the world of today are structured around pyramids of power. There are the rulers and the ruled, the governors and the governed, the order-issuers and the order-followers. At its heart, it is a system of domination. And an unstable system of domination at that. There are only so many head tables in the world, so the political game of musical chairs never stops.¹ But just because that is the way things are does not mean that is the way things are meant to be.

James and John wanted guaranteed seats in power next to Jesus, but Jesus said, "You don't understand what it means to be beside me on my right and left-hand." The disciples got jealous and Jesus said, "Don't be like that. Our community is not shaped by the same rules as the world." Now think again about your friend or family member, trying to get by in a world shaped by models of domination and intimidation. Stressing out over the economy. Worrying about trying to get ahead. Frustrated by abusive language, abusive policies, abusive behavior. What are your options? You can buy

them coffee and listen to them vent, but then nothing really changes. Or you could bring them here, where there's prayer and quiet and Jesus saying "The way things are is not how things are meant to be. Trust me."

Now we're ready to hear that last verse from the passage in Mark: *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life [as] a ransom for many.*" Jesus isn't interested in domination, telling you to serve him, to debase yourself before God and others, to believe in pyramids of power and simply put your trust in a new leader seated on a golden throne. That's to miss the point entirely. Jesus came to serve with us, beside us, as we are to serve with him, beside him. Not vertical hierarchies, but horizontal communities. Not upward mobility; but rather, if anything, downward mobility. Casting down our eyes upon those around us, especially those struggling, beaten down, crumpled near us, and moving downward to be with them. And in that movement is freedom and release.

How? Because Jesus gave his life as a ransom – to win our liberation from slavery, from stress, from anxiety, from fear; from hopeless, aimless, fruitless, soulless wandering through life. What a gift for us. What a gift to share. Which is why we invite others to church. So that they can bring their Zebedee genes into our sanctuary and sit right down in our pews. So they can bring their tear-stained handkerchiefs and their heavy hearts and not have to be in control for a while. So they can drag chains in, but not carry them back out. So they can be still, be at peace, become God's child once more. The ransom has been paid. Another order has been established for us, the downward mobility-folk, the least and the last and the loved-all-the-more-for-it folk. God knows there are lots of people who could do with hearing that message. God knows and so do you. Peace be with you.

AMEN

¹ Cf. Barbara Brown Taylor "The Trickle Up Effect", *Bread of Angels*; quoted by Kate Huey; <http://i.ucc.org/> website; Great Service (October 12-18).