

September 26, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 10:35–45](#)

TITLE: Intervals of Faith – Minor 7th: Baptism Resolutions

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

When you play a note on the piano, you hear a tone that consists of vibrations of a particular frequency to which a name has been given: C, E flat, G sharp. Pick two notes and play them together and now the vibrations interact. Some pairs of notes vibrate as if they were always meant to be together. Other pairs vibrate in such a way that their sound creates tension—not necessarily ugly or unpleasant, but a tension that wants to resolve, that wants to go somewhere. The minor 7th interval is like that. Once it is played, it can't just sit there. It has to go somewhere—maybe to a happy major chord or to a melancholy minor chord. But in musical terms, we say the interval has to resolve. That's just part of what it is.

In our lives there are moments when we do something that sets in motion something else, one act that creates a tension that must be resolved. You are on a date and you lean forward to kiss your companion. You can't just hold that pose forever. It either leads to a kiss or to a turned-away face—but something happens next. Other examples: a job is offered to you; you either say “Yes” and go down one path of life, or say “No” and choose a different path. Or a relationship simply cannot continue as it's been. You either stay to work things out or you pack your bags and take that difficult step out the door.

Once, long ago Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He saw two brothers near the water's edge mending their nets in their boat. Jesus called to them and said, “Follow me.” Like a minor 7th interval, those two words hung in the air and required a resolution. Either James and John would stay where they were or they'd step out into the shallow water and follow this compelling young rabbi. In this case, the resolution was a literal resolution: The brothers resolved to follow Jesus no matter what—even when the path they were on would lead to hardship, rejection, and ultimately a cross.

Which is where our gospel lesson for today picks up the story. James and John have been with Jesus from Day 1. They've seen wonderful things, miraculous things, but some part of Jesus' message hasn't fully sunk in. For example, Jesus had just finished telling them that in Jerusalem the Messiah would be arrested, condemned, mocked and killed. Right after that, James and John show poor timing by sidling up to Jesus to ask for a favor. They said, “Teacher, when you are glorified—when you are in power—let us sit on either side of you as your second in command.” The request has been made. It hangs out there in the air like an unresolved minor 7th chord. Something has to happen next.

Once the other disciples realize what James and John have asked, they get angry at what they perceive as a disloyal power grab. The sons of Zebedee may have known Jesus longer than just about all the other disciples, but that doesn't give them the right

to request positions of power above the others. But in that moment, Jesus doesn't rebuke them. He doesn't get angry. He honestly tells them that they don't understand what they're asking. What is to come is not what they expect. It will not involve cups of gold but a cup of suffering. It will not involve a baptismal washing that refreshes and anoints as if with fine perfume. It will involve a baptism that is like a deep submersion in water almost to the point of drowning. Jesus says that the resolution will be different than they think. James and John answer back that they are willing to drink this cup and receive this baptism. But it's clear they don't yet understand what lies ahead for them.

So where are we in this story? Think of the times you've agreed to something only to discover that you've signed up for far more than you imagined. You say "yes" to a new assignment at work or to join a committee, yes, even a church committee, only to discover that the time and work responsibilities are far greater than you anticipated. You say "yes" to a marriage proposal—you bring a new baby home from the hospital – but in that moment, you don't truly know all that is going to be required of you. You might ask yourself later, "What have I gotten myself into? Am I equal to this challenge?" All of us have doubts and worries at some point. However, in most cases we figure things out; we see it through. We resolve to keep going forward.

Years ago during a Monday Night football game between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants, one of the announcers commented that the great running back Walter Payton had just accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage. To which the other announcer wisely noted, "Yeah, and that's with someone knocking him down every 4.6 yards!"

James and John were not bad disciples. They had been beside Jesus even when he'd been rejected and knocked down, and they'd stayed right beside him as they headed toward obvious conflict in the capital city of Jerusalem. They were loyal; they were committed; they had long before resolved to follow wherever Jesus led and they'd honored that resolution.

That's why Jesus' response wasn't angry or chastising. He gave an answer that was intended to comfort them and frankly comfort us even today. He asked if they could drink from the same cup he had drunk from. Remember, Jesus wasn't wealthy. He'd mostly drunk from common cups, perhaps of wood or clay. He'd been given water from a ladle on a hot day by a Samaritan woman he met at a well. He'd had a few meals at the homes of wealthy hosts, but mostly he'd cupped his hands and drank from streams and freshwater pools in Galilee. He'd been dusty and tired; he'd been rejected and mocked; he'd had crowds exhaust him with their demands. And soon he would share a final cup with friends who would flee, deny, or betray him—drinking a cup of suffering he prayed might pass from him, but which he resolved to drink no matter what.

And James—well, James himself would become the first Christian martyr. So yes, Jesus knew James would drink from the same cup as him. He might not sit on a throne, but his faithfulness would be an example for centuries to come.

Then Jesus spoke about baptism. They'd seen the baptizing done by John the Baptist—the splashing in the river Jordan, a dunking beneath the waters, a symbolic drowning, followed by a reemergence into the light. It was meant to be something risky and dramatic, but also hopeful. The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome and said, *Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by God's glory, so we too might walk in newness of life*" (Romans 6:4).

Today's churches are often quick to present the gospel as a "no-risk offer," a pathway to respectability and an insurance card against all trouble. But following Christ will lead to trouble. Faith is counter-cultural on lots of levels. It speaks up when others would remain silent. It advocates when others would acquiesce to the status quo. It challenges "power over" with a servant mentality of "power with" those on the margins, with those oppressed or rejected due to a long list of reasons—age, gender, race, economic status, where they live, where they work, how they speak. Walter Brueggemann has said, "The church tells the truth in a society that lives in illusion; it grieves in a society that practices denial; and it expresses hope in a society that lives in despair."

Consider the baptisms we witnessed today. Should we have warned the children that this is what they've gotten themselves into? No, because baptism into Christ is not just a baptism into his death. As Paul said, *"we've been baptized with Christ so that just as he was raised from the dead by God's glory, so we too might walk in newness of life."* All of this—the cup we drink, at times bitter, at times refreshing, or the baptism we receive, at times practically drowning us, at times raising us up into new life, all of these acts move us forward by God's grace and Christ's redeeming love. They are minor 7th moments that vibrate and resonate before sending us forward by faith into a newness of life.

Seriously: Consider the baptisms we witnessed today. Two young girls—surrounded by parents and family, in a church where this sacrament has been done literally hundreds of times, near a table where communion cups have been served hundreds of times. Every one who drank from the cup or stepped to the baptism font signed up for more than they could imagine at the time. But still we come forward, because where else can we go? In Christ there is life. With Christ, there is strength to get back up when knocked down. Through Christ there is justice and joy for us and all humanity. By grace things resolve for the best. Trust and believe this good news.

AMEN