

March 8, 2020

Sermon Series: Hard Questions On the Way



Do We Have What It Takes?  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Mark 10:32-52 NRSV**

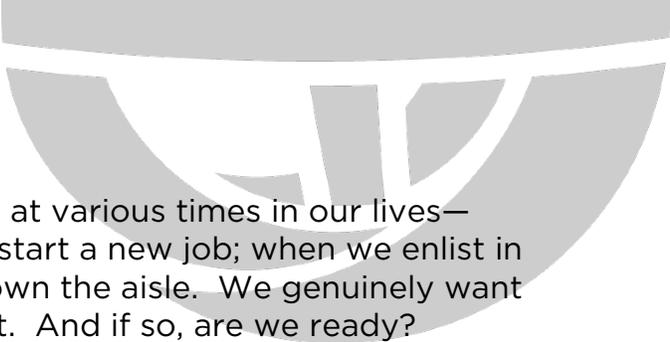
<sup>32</sup>They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup>saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; <sup>34</sup>they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" <sup>39</sup>They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>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. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup>Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>49</sup>Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." <sup>50</sup>So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." <sup>52</sup>Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.





Do we have what it takes? We ask this question at various times in our lives—when our team plays in a tournament; when we start a new job; when we enlist in a branch of the military; when we take a walk down the aisle. We genuinely want to know if these things will be good for us or not. And if so, are we ready?

*Do we have what it takes?* I was asking this question myself as I stopped at the DMV this past Monday. I hadn't done my homework, but I knew my driver's license was soon up for renewal. I had questions on my mind: Will I need to take a written test? How about a driving test? What's this Real ID business? And perhaps most important of all: Will I need to take a vision test? Assuming that I do, how will it go with only one eye?

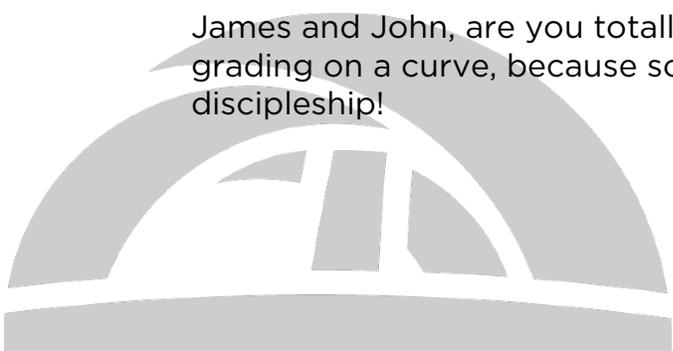
*Do we have what it takes?* I suspect the disciples are asking this question too. They've been in Jericho. They're "on the road" with Jesus. Jesus is walking ahead of them, leading the way. He finally reveals their destination: Jerusalem. We the reader have known where they're going for at least a couple of chapters, but they haven't. When they find out it's Jerusalem, their capital, the disciples are both amazed and afraid. It's a politically charged city. Passover is near. What will it mean for Jesus? And what will it mean for them?

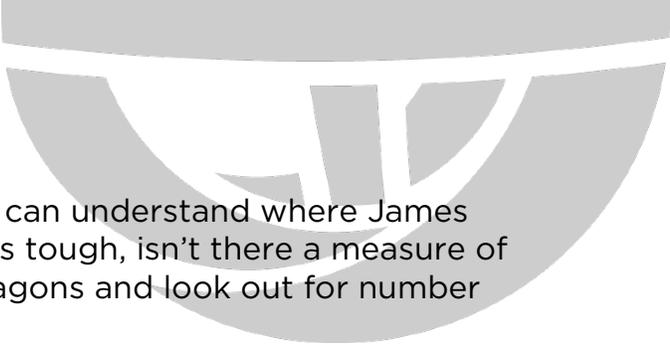
As I mentioned last week, this time on the road is part of their training. It's a school of discipleship. And there are no easy lessons. You may know: the discipleship section at the center of Mark begins with the healing of a blind man. The healing comes, not all at once, but in a couple of stages. This implies gradual enlightenment. As we follow the story of Jesus and the disciples, we are left to wonder: Who really sees in these events and who doesn't?

So far the disciples aren't "seeing" well at all. In chapter 8, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. Peter refuses to buy it: "This will never happen to you, Jesus, not on our watch!" In chapter 9, Jesus again predicts his death and resurrection. The disciples get into a bitter argument over which one of them is the greatest. To break the impasse, Jesus scoops up a child in his arms and tells them that greatness rests, not in doing impressive deeds but in welcoming vulnerable persons such as this.

In chapter 10, Jesus yet again predicts his death and resurrection. The details are even more explicit: they will hand him over to the Romans; they will mock him, spit on him, whip him, and then he will die. This is followed by a calculated question from James and John. They're asking if Jesus will reward them with positions of prestige when the great day finally comes.

James and John, are you totally clueless? The disciples better hope Jesus is grading on a curve, because so far they're failing this course in their school of discipleship!





Now, in my more charitable moments, perhaps I can understand where James and John are coming from. When the going gets tough, isn't there a measure of self-protection in all of us? Time to circle the wagons and look out for number one.

How many Democratic presidential candidates dropped out this past week? A number of them chose to endorse Joe Biden. While we can't read their minds—and maybe they really *do* care about their delegates—I can't help but feel that a few of these candidates might be positioning themselves for potential cabinet posts or even a vice-presidential nomination. Am I being too cynical here?

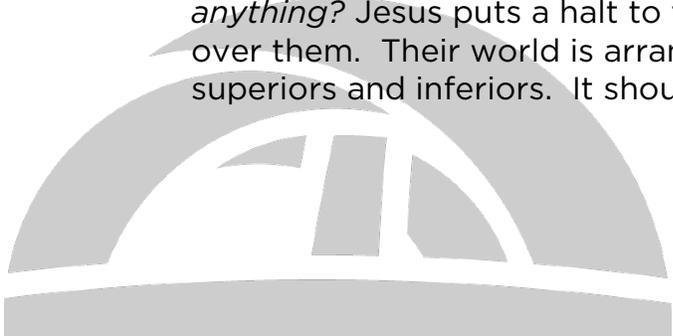
Jesus challenges James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" They lay it on the line: "Allow us to sit on your right and your left when you get elected Messiah!" I can picture Jesus shaking his head: "You don't know what you're asking." Jesus pushes them: "Are you able to drink of the cup from which I will drink?" They reply, "Sure! We can do that!" And are you able to be baptized into the same life that I have been baptized?" And again, "Sure! We can do that!" They're confident they have what it takes. But what hasn't yet sunk in is that Jesus will come into his glory sooner than they expect, and it will happen on a cross. On his right and left will be two more crosses. No, they really don't know what they are asking.

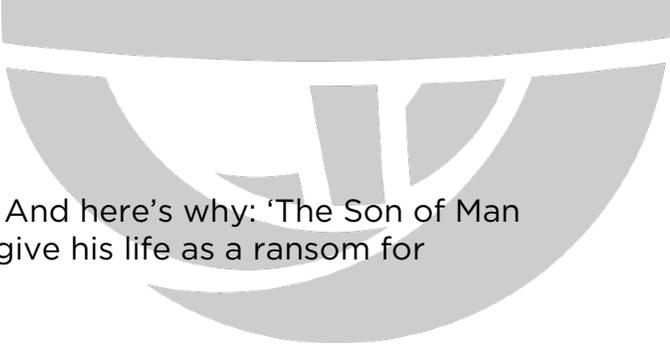
If Jesus' third prediction tells us anything, it's not simply that he will suffer, but that his followers might suffer too. William Willimon tells of young man – a Baptist – who was going through a turbulent time in his life. In an emotional worship service, he gave his life to Christ. He said of his conversion: "I have found what I've always been looking for."

That young man went on to start a youth drop-in center for inner city kids in East Saint Louis. He lived in a dangerous part of town, the same area as most of the kids who came to the drop-in center. He was the victim of crime on a number of occasions.

Willimon was marveling at the young man's courage. He asked him: "How do you do this?" The man replied, "Well, it's sort of what you sometimes get when you get Jesus." He said with a smile: "I thought I found Christ, but in reality, Christ found me. And he gave me a job to do for him, rather than what I wanted to do for myself."

James and John's little powerplay doesn't please the others. In fact, they get angry and jealous. *What about us? We've left home and family too. Don't we get anything?* Jesus puts a halt to their squabbling: "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Their world is arranged hierarchically: with masters and slaves, superiors and inferiors. It should not be this way with you. Leaders must wait on





tables. Masters must assume the role of slaves. And here's why: 'The Son of Man did not come to *be* served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Are the disciples going to be able to figure this out? Will they have what it takes? What does serving look like, anyway? It doesn't have to rise to the level of running a youth drop-in center, but it could. You don't have to make burritos at Open Table, but you might. Or how about helping an unfortunate friend; doing a thankless job and telling no one about it; lending a hand to someone in need; spending time with a person who's lonely; encouraging someone who's down in the dumps. Friends, if you're a disciple of Jesus, there is no end to what your serving might be.

Lorraine Larson has been on hospice care for the last few weeks. One by one, and two by two, Lorraine's children and grandchildren have come to pay their respects and say goodbye. Lorraine is 98-years-old. She's been a matriarch of the Larson clan for a long time. I've been privileged to be at her bedside when the family has gathered. One thing is abundantly clear: this family knows that Jesus has been at the center of Lorraine's life. She regularly lived by his values. She shared his love and attention with them, and she told them that often. As Lorraine saw it, there was no better way to live than to serve others as Jesus did.

As Jesus and his disciples are getting ready to leave Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus is feverishly trying to get his attention: "Son of David, Son of David, have mercy on me." *Son of David* is another way to refer to the Messiah. Bystanders are trying to shush the noisy Bartimaeus, but Jesus won't hear of it. "Call him here," he says. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and hurries over. Jesus asks him the same question he asked James and John, but this time around it feels different: "What do you want me to do for you?" We know his reply: he wants the gift of sight. Jesus views his request as an act of faith, and he heals him.

With the healing of Bartimaeus, our bookend is complete. We've come to the end of the school of discipleship in Mark. There has been some gradual enlightenment along the way, but plenty of blindness and failure too. Clearly, there are more lessons still to learn.

Do they have what it takes? At the present moment, Bartimaeus' eyes are open. He can see better than anyone. So what does he do? He follows Jesus on the way and becomes his disciple. And that probably means some sort of serving—and suffering—are right around the corner.

It's sort of what we sometimes get when we get Jesus. Amen.



