



Let's Go Over This One More Time for James and John

TEXT
Mark 10:35–45

March 5, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Time is running out for Jesus' disciples. In this season of Lent, we retrace the steps of Jesus as he nears Jerusalem. We forget just how offensive Jesus was to so many around him. Jerusalem is where his suffering occurs. Jerusalem is where the crowds turn on him, where those in power do what power does: get rid of anything that challenges their power.

In the verses immediately preceding our reading, Jesus for the third time tells his disciples that he is going to be handed over and crucified.

The first time Jesus told them this, Peter took Jesus aside and said that this could not happen. Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One of Judaism. He can't talk like this. The Messiah is not supposed to suffer like this. In that moment, Jesus says that Peter's understanding, his theology, his faith is so far off that he is more like Satan than God.

Jesus tells them again: *I will be handed over, condemned and crucified.* They still didn't get it, but this time no one asked him about it. I guess not. The last guy who spoke up was called Satan; I'd stay quiet too.

One last time, Jesus tries to tell his followers who he is, what he is about, what will happen. It becomes clear that they don't get it — because James and John ask Jesus if they can sit at his right and at his left when he comes into his kingdom. Really? These guys make The Three Stooges look like Ph.D. material.

Jesus moves on and heals blind Bartimaeus. It's obviously easier to heal a man from physical blindness, as remarkable as that is, than to heal his disciples from their spiritual blindness.

What must be particularly discouraging for Jesus is that James and John have been with Jesus from the beginning. Do you remember? Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, and he spotted them, mending their nets in the boat with their dad. Jesus said, "Follow me." They got out of the boat and they followed. It was a good day for them. They got it right. But on this day, when Jesus is just hours from Jerusalem, they ask, *Jesus, when you come into your glory, we would like to be seated on your right and on your left. I know you have lots of followers, but we were there from the beginning, and to tell you the truth, we think we deserve these seats of*

honor. Jesus, what do you say? I don't know if Jesus wanted to slap them or if he wanted to weep, but they don't get it.

Now, I suppose this could be a comfort. I suppose we could read this and assume that we have this story to make us feel better about ourselves. We get it. Poor James and John, the actual followers of Jesus, they just weren't paying attention. But lucky for us, we get Jesus. Jesus would look at us with apologetic expression and say, *I'm sorry, do you mind if I go over this one more time for James and John?*

I don't think that is why the church kept this story alive. I think the church kept this story alive because we are all like James and John. This is an important story that reminds us or instructs us just how difficult it is to really understand this one who goes to Jerusalem to be handed over.

We all fail to understand Jesus. It's not a lack of intelligence. No, discipleship is not for the smart. James and John do not have a problem of the mind; they have a problem of the heart. What makes Jesus so hard to process is Jesus was selfless. To Jesus, you matter to him more than he matters to him. Think about that.

A fundamental challenge for human beings is to recognize the importance of their neighbor. The truth is, I spend my whole life with the unspoken conviction that I am more important than you are.

James and John, their question reflects their sense of self-importance. *Can we sit at your right and at your left? We think we have been pretty good at this disciple thing. Remember, you picked us first. It just seems appropriate — can we sit at your right and at your left?* They are blind to the fact that they have lost perspective of their neighbor.

I have told you before of James Henley Thornwell. He was one of the most brilliant theological minds of the 19th century — a Presbyterian. There is a children’s home named for him in South Carolina.

Thornwell was a faithful man, but he believed God smiled on slavery. Thornwell said, “There are many rights which are owed to other people: the English, the French and the slave master, for example, but not the slave because God had not fashioned the slave to meet the responsibilities that accompany these rights.” It’s the way God planned it.

Thornwell further argued that slavery was a matter for the state, and the church had no right to comment on it.¹ He had no idea he was blind like that.

It wasn’t that he lacked intelligence. It wasn’t a matter of the mind; it was a matter of the heart. He failed to recognize how important his neighbor was.

With the gift of history, we can see how foolish he was. But had we lived in 1860, who knows what the world would have looked like to us?

Jenny mentioned last week the shooting in our city that made the news. “Get out of my country,” Adam Purinton said before he shot three men, two of them from India. Srinivas Kuchibhotla, 32 years old, is dead. Purinton feels if you are from India, you do not belong here. Mr. Purinton’s form of patriotism is not universal, but it is common.

Vigils have been held again. A GoFundMe account has raised considerable amounts of money to help this family. Kindness has risen. They were engineers at Garmin. They could have been cab drivers or surgeons at KU Med for that matter ... but none of that matters.

Too many people in our country would agree with Mr. Purinton. Oh, they might not choose violence, but there is a growing sense that America is defined by who doesn’t belong here. So we see Jewish cemeteries vandalized. And Jewish community centers across the country are being threatened.

I confess that for most of my adult life, I lived with the assumption that the overt racism that occurred during my childhood was something that we left behind us, something captured in the decades behind us. But I was naive about that. It doesn’t always look like it did before, but the racism that is so much a part of this nation’s history is very much a part of her today.

I read about Richard Spencer. He’s a well-educated, postgraduate at Duke and the University of Chicago. He’s a leader in one of the many alt-right groups. His is the National Policy Institute. It sounds innocent enough — even patriotic. But they publish pseudoscientific tracts with titles like “Race Differences in Intelligence.” Spencer and his crowd would condemn Thornwell; slavery is abhorrent, they would insist. They just want a white ethnostate.² It’s not about racism, he says. It’s about identity politics. If the nation is for everyone, the nation is for no one, he says.

Many these days see that as patriotic — America is defined by who we keep out or who we keep down. It may be American to some, but it’s not Christian. The struggle for people of faith is to see the value of the neighbor. And it is a struggle for all of us.

We can understand this text, and we can speak out against Thornwell and Spencer and Purinton — and we should. But the harder work is to stand under this text and confess our own struggle to value the neighbor. And that’s a journey.

I don’t really want to do this, but I will tell you some of my journey. I have shared it before. It’s not completely comfortable because I am ashamed of myself.

Thirty years ago this past summer, I was ordained. I knelt in the sanctuary of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the saints of that congregation laid their hands on me.

I had promised that Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior. I promised to be obedient to Christ and work for the reconciliation of the world. And I was blind and didn't know it.

My friend Susie wrote me a note. "Congratulations on your ordination. I pray you have a fruitful and faithful ministry."

Susie had been a pastor and had taught me much about discipleship. I suppose it had been a year or so earlier she asked me, "Tom, a lot of folks are talking about gay and lesbian persons. Do you think they should be pastors?"

I said, "No. I don't think so." Three years later, I learned that Susie left the church because she couldn't love her partner and be accepted in the church. It was a body blow to me. I knew what an amazing pastor she was. I began a journey of confession and shame ... as I realized how wrong I was. I was blind to the importance of my neighbor. It's a fundamental challenge for us, for all of us.

Jesus ... it's hard to get him, because the truth is you matter to him more than he matters to him. James and John didn't get that. The good news is that ultimately, this is not a story about James and John, and it's not even a story about us. It's a story about Jesus.

They ask for the chief seats in his kingdom. He doesn't slap them, he doesn't weep, he doesn't wash his hands of them, but he turns and goes to Jerusalem. He tells them, *It's time now.*

And in Jerusalem, he will die for them. And in Jerusalem,

he will eat with them one last time. It is important to remember who was at that table. Judas, so certain of his perspective, he was there. And Jesus fed him. And Peter, soon to learn that following Jesus can scare you to death, so he denied him, was there. But still Jesus fed Peter.

And James and John, they didn't get Jesus, and they didn't even know it. But still Jesus says, *For you, my body is broken* — which means, there is room for us with him as well. There is no brokenness, no shame, no sin that can keep us away. That's how important you are to him.

¹*The Presbyterian Enterprise* (1956), pp. 216–217

²*Time*, April 25, 2016, p. 41

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.