



Choices ... Not Evolution

TEXT
Mark 10:35-45

March 24, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus' disciples ask him, "Can we sit at your right and at your left?"

He asks them, "Are you able to drink from the cup that I am to drink or be baptized with my baptism?" This is clearly church metaphor. James and John are calling shotgun, and Jesus is asking, "Can you live the life that I live?" — knowing in this moment that living his life also means suffering like he suffers.

Amazingly, they respond, "Yes, we are able." No second guessing, no hedging, just "yes."

Here's the thing: In Mark's gospel, the disciples never shine. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter says, "Oh, I know, pick me. You are the Christ." But then Peter tells Jesus, "Of course, that means you can't suffer; you are the Christ." Jesus calls Peter Satan.

When Jesus tells them the parables, they don't understand what he's talking about. And in this moment, when Jesus is teaching them that if you want greatness, you need to serve, they are calling shotgun. "Can we sit at the head table?" They are always dancing on the wrong foot, saying the wrong thing. They clearly don't get him. It's

one of the reasons Mark may be my favorite gospel. I take great comfort in knowing I don't have to get Jesus to try to follow him. There's room for slackers.

Jesus asks these guys, "Are you able to live my life?"

They respond without hesitation, "Yes sir, you bet. We are able." It's almost comical. It's like when the preacher stands before a young couple and asks, "Will you be loving and faithful, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health?" And they just say, "Yes." They never stop and ask, "How much sorrow?"

We could have told these disciples that living like Jesus never comes as easily as we wish. Knowing them like he did, I'm a little surprised Jesus even asked the question.

As we reflect on what it means to live a life of character, my point today is simple: The good must be chosen. The good doesn't just happen, the common good doesn't just evolve; it must be chosen.

The shooting in New Zealand and the response of that nation to their citizens has been in the news. They were shocked by this brutal act of violence. We forget this kind of violence isn't common everywhere.

Last October, Robert Bowers walked into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. He shot and killed 11 people and wounded six others, simply because they were Jewish. Bowers was wounded and taken to the hospital, where he was treated. Three of his caretakers were Jewish.

Ari Mahler was Bowers' primary hospital nurse, and he said, "I did my job, a job which requires compassion and empathy over everything." Mahler said, "He thanked me for saving him, for showing him kindness. I'm sure he had no idea I was Jewish, and I chose not to tell him because I wanted him to feel compassion. I wanted to show him empathy. And if he finds out I'm Jewish, does it really matter?" He then said, "If my actions mean anything, love means everything"¹

He could have said, "Out of solidarity for my Jewish brothers and sisters, I will not help you." But he made a different choice. Good like that always has to be chosen.

Our rabbi asked, "Are you able to live the life that I live? ... Are you able to love like I love?"

"We are able," they said. Of course, we know when he was arrested, they fled and hid in the

shadows. Loving like Jesus is seldom easy.

I think one of the challenges of character is that it begins by seeing the value in others. It begins by committing to the common good. Our tendency is to prioritize ourselves; to put ourselves first. There are some voices in our culture that tell us that's exactly what we should do. They promise if everyone chooses what is good for them — if you choose what is good for you, and I choose what is good for me — what's good for all will just evolve; it will just show up. But our history with each other indicates it's not that simple. Character requires not just my needs, but the needs of my neighbor be prioritized.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna and was rounded up by the Nazis chanting blood and soil as they marched him to the camps in 1942. Frankl learned in the camps that life is not first about my passion. He said he learned to ask not “What do I want from life?” but “What does life require of me?” Frankl's own sense was that life had given him an assignment and placed a moral task before him.²

I think Frankl is describing what Jesus identified as calling or vocation. Ari Mahler said, “I did my job, which required compassion and empathy.” In some sense, loving like Jesus is our job.

Frederick Buechner is famous for defining our vocation — our calling. In a little book titled *Wishful Thinking*, Buechner wrote, your calling occurs where “your deep gladness and

the world's deep hunger meet.”³ I love that definition, but I think it's wrong. At my age, I have come to believe this definition is just wishful thinking. Moses would not have described calling that way. Jeremiah didn't understand it that way. Jesus' garden prayer was that “this cup would pass him by.” No, our calling isn't always about our bliss; it's more our job. It is not always about what the world gives to us; it is what the world needs from us.

And that is hard. It's so hard that I wonder why Jesus even asked the question. You would think he knew when the shadow of the cross reached them, they would scatter.

I was in a conversation this week with a new friend, a pastor from another city. He spoke of how the church in America is dying. That's not our story at Village, but it's true many places. The larger Presbyterian community of Heartland Presbytery in the last six years has lost 25 percent of its membership.⁴ And everyone with a blog or a website offers reasons and causes and changes that have brought this about. But I wonder if one reason is, we have failed to pay attention to our calling; if we have gotten so concerned about how to take care of ourselves that we have failed to ask what the world needs from us.

For a generation, we have obsessed over sexuality. It is hurting our Methodist brothers and sisters now, and we should understand — because not that long ago, we were in the same boat. But while we worried about

this, the Middle East crumbled. Africa has children dying every day because of a lack of clean water. We continue to watch our neighbors being gunned down in senseless shootings, and our government leaders seem mostly apathetic.

We are witnessing horrendous floods and fires and storms, and too many are willing to gamble that the science is wrong, and we can just buy our way out of the effects of climate change. For decades the prosperity of this country has become increasingly concentrated, leaving far too many to live on wages that are unlivable. We have witnessed in recent years an increasingly open and bold racist America, leaving me to admit I was naive that America had committed herself to reject such bigotry. More and more of our young people battle depression, our sisters and daughters experience violence and demeaning behavior at work or school. The list of those who need our food pantry shows no end. I could go on.

And the church in America has chosen to worry about sexual orientation of our pastors, or whose love is worthy of marriage, or whose kindergarteners can go to school. We have paid attention to the wrong things, and it has left many to ask, “Why would I be part of church if this is all that following Jesus is about?”

Now, before you think I have completely gone off the deep end, let me say two things. I am not suggesting that it's up to us to fix the world. I know the problems in the world, and the

problems in our own hearts are big. I am not lacking humility when it comes to the impact we have on the big problems in life. But I also know this: Jesus asked his disciples, “Are you able to love like I love?” and I think he was serious.

My friend Rev. Dan Vigilante is in my Moveable Feast with me, and he pointed to something important. Jesus says, “You will drink, and you will be baptized with my baptism. You will live my life.” Dan says that was not a threat, but a promise.

He said, “Evidently Jesus simply won’t give up on the possibility that someday we will choose to love like he loves. He just won’t give up on those dreams. And maybe an important step for us to get there is for us to say out loud, ‘Yes we are able.’ Like a young couple in love long before we know the full circumstances to be demanded, we say ‘Yes, I’ll love like that.’

“At some point or another, Jesus has asked all of us, ‘Are you able?’

“‘Yes, Jesus, we are able,’ knowing full well we have no idea whether we are or aren’t; only that we also know we can’t do anything else but say yes.”⁵

This is why I need to hang around you. I need to be part of this faith community because more than many, you pay attention to the big things. You endeavor to love like Christ loves. And when I’m not so sure about myself, you will do something that inspires me again or shows me the way.

It happened for me this week. After the terrible shooting in

Christchurch, Village member Jennifer Stradinger⁶ and a friend of hers, who is Jewish, decided they needed to do some things. They got some cards and flowers, and they drove to the Islamic Center here in Kansas City. They arrived as some women were emerging from prayer. The women invited Jennifer and her friend inside. They explained, “We just came to say we are sorry, that we hate this, that we hope you are not afraid, that we believe faith calls us to be gracious to one another.” The Muslim women were overcome. You know, when the world sends the message that you are hated, it matters that some in the world send a message of love. Sending a message of love is power. And it may not change everything, not yet, but it is our job — and at times our joy.

I think every Sunday we are surprised to hear him ask one more time, “Are you able?” You know why he keeps asking, right? Because deep in his heart he believes we are.

Maybe he just wants us to say it out loud to one another, to the world, and to God — to say, “Yes, we are able”; to say it over and over and over again until, bit by bit, beat by beat, the rhythms of our hearts align with his.

He asked, “Are you able to love like I love?” He wants to know.

So we say, “Yes, we are able.” What else would we say?

¹Thanks to Rev. Agnes Norfleet of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for sharing this in a paper

presented to the Moveable Feast in 2019. Reported in “Nurse Who Treated Pittsburgh Shooter,” Nov. 4, 2018, theguardian.com.

²David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), pp. 21–25

³Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (1973), p. 95

⁴Heartland Presbytery statistics indicate a total membership of 18,333 on December 31, 2012, and 13,663 on December 31, 2018, for a total loss of 4,670 members in six years.

⁵Rev. Dan Vigilante, stated in a paper on this text presented to the Moveable Feast in 2018. I am grateful to Dan for his insights not only in these three paragraphs, but also in other places in the sermon.

⁶I very much appreciate Jennifer’s permission to share this story in this sermon.

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>.