# Greatness and service

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship  
Will Fitzgerald  
October 18, 2015

Mark 10:35-45

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

## Context

Last week, we looked briefly at the beginning of this passage, in which Jesus promises good things to anyone who had left everything to follow Jesus.

And, immediately, prior to this story, Jesus foretells he death. He takes the twelve disciples aside to tell them specifically what is going to happen to him, the Son of Man: they are going to go to Jersusalem, be handed over to the religious leaders who will condemn him to death, then they will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock, torture, and then kill him. And three days later he will rise again.

This passage has a lot to say about power and weakness, about making people do what they don’t want to do, and choosing to do for others.

## The commentary

*10:35 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."*

There are many natural social groupings, among them your economic classes, what nationality you are, what religion you are, and so on. One of the most powerful groups even to this day is your immediate family. Usually, people stick up for and pay special attention to, their own families. So it is not surprising that two brothers approach Jesus for a special favor for the two of them. In Matthew’s account, they even take their mother with them, and she makes the request.

They recognize that Jesus had power, and they wanted some of that for their own family’s benefit. It may be that they’re approaching this like a trusted official approaches their powerful ruler. This is kind of the opening salvo in a negotiation between Jesus and the two brothers. At first, they ask for the moon: for Jesus to do anything they ask. They are somewhat respectful, but he has something they want, and they are determined to get it.

*10:36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"*

Jesus wisely asks them what they want before he promises it to them. I notice he does not chide them yet for their audacious request, but he is willing to hear them out.

*10:37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."*

Now, I wonder if they were thinking about those promises Jesus made. Not in Mark’s gospel, but in Matthew’s gospel, in addition to what Mark’s gospel records, it says:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

So, were they thinking of this glorious day? Where they focused on Jesus’s promise that he would be raised from the dead, and assume that the days of glory would begin immediately, and there were going to be thrones ready for them to judge all of Israel? How heady that would be!  
  
*10:38 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?"*

And Jesus retorts with: You don’t know what you are asking. Which is usually the case for them, and for us. And he asks them two questions: can they drink his cup, can they be baptized as he was?  
  
*10:39 They replied, "We are able."*

And their answer seems immediate and definite. I wonder if the baptism question was easy, since they had undoubtedly already been baptized by either John, or Jesus or one of the other disciples.

And there is some hint, in their quick answer, that they understood the question about the cup as a question about whether they were prepared to rule. They perhaps see it as a cup of honor or power, such as you’d find in Pharaoh’s day, or King Xerxes, or among the Romans.

They are, of course, wrong. They might have reflected that cup and wine are often used as a symbol of the overflowing anger and wrath, a picture of the kind of violent behavior of people “in their cups,” that is drunk, and unable to restrain themselves. And they might have reflected on how baptism itself is a falling down into the wild waters that would kill us if we stayed down too long; it, too, is a picture of death and distress.

Soon, things will get apparently very much out of hand, just as Jesus had said. Or better, it would get out of *their* hands: Jesus would be handed over to first the religious leaders, and second to the political leaders.  
  
*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;*

But Jesus prophesizes that they will share in his cup and baptism, that is, the same kind of violence that would lead to his death would lead to theirs.

And this is exactly what happened. Of course, they both participate in the violent last days of Jesus. And, in Acts 12, we read that Herod Agrippa I has James killed. They do pay the price.

And I want to note something else: it’s almost impossible to read Jesus talking about “the cup” and not think of the Lord’s supper, and not think of “baptism” and think of Christian baptism. Going beyond the immediate meaning of the violence they were all about to undergo together, we see the glimmer of light in that these means of grace were coming, and, as the churched formed, they would participate in commemorating the death of Jesus and commemorating the new life of converts to the Way of Christ.   
  
*10:40 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."*

Jesus takes this request off the table. It’s not in his power to decide who gets the nearest places.

And thus, their request is denied.

In fact, the next time we hear of someone being on the left hand and the right hand of Jesus was this: “And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left (Mark 15:27).” As Jesus said, he would be given up, first to the religious leaders, and then to the political leaders. It was they who decided who would be on his left and right side.  
  
*10:41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.*

I’m not surprised at their anger. This would get me upset, too.  
  
*10:42a So Jesus called them and said to them,*

Jesus wants to stop this bickering right away, I think, and so he calls “them” together: perhaps the ten, perhaps the twelve; it seems more likely that it was all of them, because they all had to learn this lesson, which was:

*10:42b "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. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."*

Jesus sets up a contrast here between “the Gentiles” and his followers. By “Gentiles,” Jesus especially means the Romans, and we’ll take it to mean “the world,” meaning the world systems in general, business as usual, the usual stuff of politics and a world without God.

In the Gentile world, there are rulers and there are subjects. Rulers get to decide how things are going to go, and they do so to achieve their own particular goals and wishes. The rulers are great and powerful. We have to hear this in the context of what Jesus had just said about his death: he was going to be subjected to others’ decisions, and bear their torture leading to his own death. And that is certainly the prototypical case: if someone is in your way, get rid of them.

For example, here in the United States, we have the most powerful country in the history of the world with the most powerful military in the history of the world. Sometimes, there are people who are our enemies who live thousands of miles away in obscure places, such as a village in Yemen or Pakistan. So, we fly remotely piloted aircraft – drones — thousands of miles from their airbases, piloted in the United States, some of which are piloted by people sitting just a couple dozen miles from us as part of the 110th Attack Wing at the Battle Creek Air National Guard base. And we drop bombs on them, sometimes killing them, sometimes killing innocent people around them. That’s what the world does.

But among those in the circle of Jesus followers, a very different ethic rules. There is not a distinction between those who are powerful and those who are weak, and the weak have to do the bidding of the strong, or bear the consequences.

Instead, Jesus calls his disciples to follow in his footsteps: to serve, not to be served. If there is any greatness among his disciples, any competition about who is best, it is to become a servant and slave of others.

## Application

When I was a child, I read a series of *Peanuts* cartoons that I still remember. They were published in August of 1961, so I was only five, so I must have read them later in an anthology. I loved *Peanuts* anthologies. Anyway, this cartoons involve the generally clueless Charlie Brown, the grumpy and somewhat selfish Lucy Van Pelt, and her little brother Linus Van Pelt.

Lucy: Why do you think we’re put here on earth, Charlie Brown? Charlie Brown: To make others happy. Lucy: I don’t think *I’m* making anyone very happy. Of course, nobody’s making *me* very happy, either … *Somebody’s not doing his job!*

Lucy: I’m intrigued by this view you have of the purpose of life, Charlie Brown. You say we’re put here on earth to make others happy? Charlie Brown: That’s right! (they sit pensively) Lucy: What are others put here for?

Lucy: Charlie Brown says we’re put here on earth to make others happy. Linus: Is *that* why we’re here? I guess I’d better start doing a better job … I’d hate to be shipped back!

In Jesus’s teaching, and in these cartoons, we learn that the road to greatness, to happiness, is in service to others. It’s important to remember, of course, that this has to be a mutual service, or it becomes (at best) a life of Lucy-like crabbiness or (at worst) being trammeled by others.

So, this week, think about ways that you can be of more service to others, or how you can show gratitude to those who serve you, or examine the ways the service has added to the greatness of your life. Let’s work on being better servants to each other, to God, and to the world. I’d hate to be shipped back!

## Acknowledgements

Especially helpful were the blog post, “[James and John call ‘Shotgun!](http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/10/james-and-john-call-shotgun.html)’” by D. Mark Davis (October 16, 2012) and Scott Hoezee’s [notes on Mark 10:35-45](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-24b/?type=the_lectionary_gospel) at the Center for Excellence in Preaching. And, of course, Charles Shultz and *Peanuts*.