

Text: Mark 10: 35-45
Title: A Dissonant Curriculum
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The list is long of those things that I loved about being a high school teacher.

I loved kids and discussions and coaching and standing on an open field with the weather in my face. I loved troublemakers and lunch and summer vacations. I loved wrestling with an idea and seeing a new, albeit faint, light dawn in a student's eyes. I loved the sound of an auditorium full of kids singing full voiced with a single guitar.

The list is long of those things that I loved about being a high school teacher.

The list is short of those things that I loathed.

I loathed grading. I loathed the monotony of grading quizzes and recording those results in a grade book. I loathed the pile of papers when I procrastinated. I loathed the grade grubbers who would battle over minutia in pursuit of their holy grail. I loathed reading final exam essays and realizing that a student had no idea what we had been doing and now we didn't have a chance to try again.

Grading essay questions was the hardest. There would be enough gray in a student's answer that you wanted to believe they got it, but the closer you read the more you realized that this was just a jumble of words on a page and the student clearly didn't get it. And, you were disappointed in the student, but mostly you were disappointed in yourself ~ discouraged because you hadn't been engaging, or clear, or helpful, or good, or....

In the Gospel of Mark the disciples clearly didn't get it. Whether misunderstood or misconstrued the disciples often missed what Jesus was teaching. And, there is nothing in the text to suggest the tone of Jesus' voice, but you might wonder if he was a disappointed or discouraged teacher.

The last few weeks we have been wading through these "hard sayings" of Jesus all of which are spoken on the way to Jerusalem and the cross; all of which provide detail about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This defining of discipleship has not been all airy-fairy-good-feelings, but more often than not it has been bracing language about taking up a cross, and losing, and serving, and the first being last, and the last being first, and welcoming the last, the least, and the littlest. It has been about money, and sex, and power...

And, three times in two chapters Jesus tells his disciple that death is coming.

And, three times in two chapters the disciples don't get it.

They ask the wrong question.

They raise other concerns.

They get sidetracked with different issues.

So, three times in two chapters Jesus corrects them in such a way that the befuddled disciples tilt their heads like a dog who can't figure out where the sound is coming from, or a high school kid who has no idea how to answer an essay question.

This morning's text is part of that narrative pattern. Jesus says that:

We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill. Three days later he will rise.

And, James and John wonder, "So, what sort of seats will we get?" They're jostling for place and power while Jesus is predicting the coming passion. They're worried about the seating chart while the teacher is getting to the culmination of the curriculum. They just don't get it.

Dear friends, one way to read this text is to highlight the density of the disciples.

Even though they have been traveling with Jesus ~ listening, learning, watching, waiting, wondering ~ their expectation of what is to come and the reality of what is to come are profoundly disconnected. No matter how many times Jesus says that this path makes its way through defeat and death, all that they hear is the podium of victory. They know they're headed to Jerusalem, but they believe they're headed for positions of power. They believe they're headed for the crown and not the cross.

Maybe they're just slow on the up take....

Maybe if he explains it to them one more time...

Maybe they're not all that different from you and me...

The scandal of the gospel is that the way of suffering, the offense of the cross, is not just an interim or a side show, but it is the full expression of God. It is essential to God's nature. It is not an aberration or a means to an end, but it is at the very heart of who Jesus is ~

and that is probably different than what we expect,
and probably different than what we want.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

Jesus is not pretending to be a servant until the time comes for him to whip off his disguise and climb onto his throne: he is a servant through and through. The good seats are not his to give. He does not even have one himself. Someone else is in charge of all that....

He is not in it for reward. He is in it for the love of God, which promises him nothing but the opportunity to give himself away. The best seat he will get this side of the grave is a throne full of splinters, and when he is hung out to dry by the powers that be, it will not be James and John on either side of him but two unnamed bandits, one on his left and one on his right.

The conflict is that our cultural curriculum is one of self-fulfillment and not self emptying. Our fundamental assumption is that the good life involves the good seat. We're hard wired that happiness hinges on security and comfort ~ not in servanthood or slavery.

And, what if that is the crux of it?

These “hard sayings” of Jesus run counter to what makes sense to us, they cut against the grain of what is instinctual, or obvious, or normal, or natural. It is not that the disciples were dolts or dullards ~ it’s that there was a different, difficult, and dissident curriculum that they didn’t know what to make of. So, over and over again they deflect, and deny, and digress, and doubt, and don’t know what to do. And, over and over again, Jesus comes back to his students and says:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it....

Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant to all.

Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me...

Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it...

One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me...

You get the idea...

I’ve been asked repeatedly to reflect on my recent trip to Israel. I think people want to hear a story about an epiphany while I ran where Jesus walked. I think people want to hear that I experienced some new found clarity and conviction while walking the *via dolorosa* ~ the way of grief or suffering, the way of the cross. I think people wish (I think I wish) that being there would have made me feel closer to Jesus....

I don’t know about all of that, but I do know that in the overwhelming and often confusing kaleidoscope of images and impressions in Israel one lasting moment of illumination was a line I scribbled in my journal about
not having answers,
and finding sharper questions,
and still being stuck with my cynical and sorry self.

I wrote:

It is always disorientating, so we keep trying to re-orientate to God. We keep trying to re-orientate to Jesus. I do that through preaching and serving a church. Is that enough when I can’t be any clearer than that?

Do you know what I mean?

My life gets cluttered with ESPN, and the New York Times, and Outside Magazine, and the Daily Show, and NPR, and the latest CD, and talk radio, and the World Wide Web, and Fox News, and the Huffington Post, and a new novel, and I-pods, and a cell phones, and Time and Newsweek, and talk, talk, talk, and going to the gym, and juggling bills, and letting house projects slide, and worrying about our kids, and, and,

And, our financial footing can feel less secure....

And, the world can seem combustible...

And, the road in front of us can seem unsure....

So, I need to keep coming back to the gospels to be reminded and reconnoitered and retread and remade. I need to keep coming back to scripture and sacrament to be rebranded, restarted, and rebooted. I need to keep coming back to God to be re-orientated not to this culture's curriculum, but to:

Not so with you... Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

I need to be continually re-orientated to a dissident curriculum. And, a dash of grace with that. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor:

If we do not understand it, we should not be too hard on ourselves. No one has, not really – not Peter, not James and John, nor any of the others who were nearest and dearest to him. If we understand any better than they did, it is only because Jesus is still serving us, still feeding us, still giving himself away for us. That is the only example of power he will give us, so maybe the best we can do is grab hold of the mystery any way that we can and hang on for dear life.

Dear friends, following the way of Jesus can be characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another. And, as that is true, then maybe one practical question of re-orientation this morning is how and to whom can I be a servant?

To an aging parent, to a difficult spouse, to struggling child, to a nosey neighbor, to an annoying co-worker, to an incompetent boss, to....

How and to whom can I be a servant?

Through my vocational call?

Through joining the work of other agencies/ministries?

Through joining the deacons in opportunities to give and serve?

Through partnering with our brothers and sisters at Roseland Christian Ministries?

Through throwing our shoulders behind wherever love trumps indifference?

And, when we stumble and get the answer wrong,

when we deflect and deny and doubt,

may we hear again and again a word of forgiveness and be re-orientated to the way of Christ.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.