

The Great Reversal

A Meditation for Wednesday in Easter 4a

St. Andrew Church - Franklin, Tennessee

Matthew 20:17-28 - Julian Gordy

The appointed gospel reading for today is from the twentieth chapter of Matthew. The reading begins:

While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.”

This is the third time that Jesus has foretold his death and resurrection to his disciples. But obviously, Jesus followers still don’t get it.

The reading goes on:

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to [Jesus] with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?”

She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”

But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

They said to him, “We are able.”

He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

“It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

They just don't get it. The disciples have come to believe that Jesus is God's long-expected messiah who has come to take over as the new king of Israel, come to kick the occupying Romans out on their ear, and make Jerusalem great again.

Jesus' insistent talk about his suffering and death the brush off, blowing right past the negative stuff and guiding the conversation into a happier path. They want to know who's going to be greatest. They want to be assured about the prime cabinet posts in the new administration.

They are dreaming of a cushy office with a corner view, maybe a private bath, a room full of administrative assistants and secretaries and a door into the inner sanctum of Jesus' messianic oval office.

James and John and their mother may even think that they have a *right* to such privilege. After all, they were among the first disciples Jesus called. They had left their fishing business and bet everything on this young rabbi from Nazareth. Now, convinced by the miracles and the adoring crowds that Jesus is the messiah, they feel pretty sure that their gamble is about to pay off.

Do you wonder how Jesus must have felt when his heart-to-heart talk about his coming suffering is met, not with sympathy and understanding but with his closest friends arguing about status?

I imagine Jesus taking a deep breath, wondering if he had picked the right disciples after all.

Sighing, he says, "Come here. Sit down. Let me see if I can find a better way to explain this to you.

"In the world, those who are considered great are the ones with prestige and privilege and power over others. The ones *with* clout lord it over the ones without. The great ones are catered to and served. They get what they want in the world.

But it is not to be so among you. In my dominion, the ones who do the serving, the ones who give themselves away are the great ones. In fact, among my followers whoever wishes to be first must be the slave of all."

You can contrast Jesus' idea of greatness with the idea summed up by the Roman Emperor Galba who reigned in the First Century. Upon taking power in Rome, Galba said, "Now that

I am emperor, I can do what I like and do it to anyone.”¹ That’s the kind of power we understand, isn’t it? Even today.

So, we should not be hard on James and John and their mom. After all, Jesus’ teaching is not easy to grasp. Not because it is difficult to understand. It is about as simple as it gets. But because it goes so against the grain of human inclination.

If you’ve spent much time at all reading the gospels, you’ve heard this theme in Jesus’ teaching and preaching before:

- *If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other one so he can whack you on that side too.*
- *Forgive those who do wrong to you. Do good to them and pray for them. In fact, love your enemies!*
- *If anyone tries to take away your coat, give him your shirt too.*
- *Give to anyone who asks of you without thinking of repayment.*
- *Don’t worry about what you are going to eat or what you are going to wear or even your life.*

In Jesus’ world, things are different. Throughout his ministry he turned the world’s expectations and standards upside down and inside out. What makes sense in the reign of God is nonsense to us.

In a great reversal of the natural order of hierarchy and power, Jesus teaches that in his reign and in his church, the most humble servant, *not* the most powerful leader or the most wealthy contributor, or the most pious person, or the most gifted singer, but the most humble servant, is the most highly regarded.

What could be more controversial or harder to live by than Jesus’ teachings?

The honest truth is, these values of Jesus are not yet my values. Maybe not yours either. I want them to be, and on my better days, I try to live by them, but to get from where we are to where Jesus calls us demands our complete transformation. It requires a *lifetime* of conversion under the guidance of the Spirit.

But there is no other way to follow Jesus than this upside down way - this way that leads to the cross, but promises abundant life.

¹William Barclay. *The Gospel of Mark*.

There is another point in this text that I hope doesn't escape us. Even though Jesus' innermost circle of followers, after all this time with him, still get his message 180 degrees wrong, and even though Jesus must surely have been frustrated with their dullness, still, **he does not give up on them.** He sees beyond their denseness and continues to teach them patiently, continues to be their friend and teacher. He is even willing to die for them.

Maybe Jesus is so patient with these hard-headed disciples because, even though they don't get it, they still follow him, even to Jerusalem. Or maybe Jesus sees them as the fearless and loyal disciples they would eventually become. Or, maybe Jesus didn't give up on these followers because he loved them.

And that love Jesus had for them and for us is the good news we need to hear when we fail to measure up to Jesus' high standards. Jesus never gives up on us.

So, we are not to be discouraged by our shortcomings. Transformation is a process, a lifelong conversion experience.

Back in the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich had a vision in which Jesus said to her, "It behoved that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." That's the good news for us here in this frustrating time of pandemic when our lives have been turned upside down and we worry about the future. "All shall be well."

It's good news any time when we realize how far we are from living the kind of life Jesus calls us to. Because Jesus loves us, he is patient with us. "All manner of things will be well." The One who loves us and gave himself for us will be with us no matter how long it takes to transform us into faithful disciples, willing servants, courageous witnesses of his gracious goodness. Amen