

Once again, the disciples do not comprehend what Jesus means by his astonishing promise. The promise, in Mark's Gospel, that in consenting to give our life for others, not only will we begin to notice ourselves becoming more whole, but that God's peace will continue to unfold. This is still a bewildering and unfamiliar pattern because it goes against so much of what the world expects and experiences.

Let me tell you a story: There is an old Russian folktale about a woodsman who sets out one winter morning to go to work. As he walked out across the icy meadow in front of the forest, he spotted a tiny bird freezing to death in the snow. The woodsman took pity on the little bird, took off his glove, picked up the bird and held it inside his coat. The little bird got warmer and warmer and began to stir to life in the woodsman's hand.

When the woodsman got to the edge of the forest, he realized that he had a little problem. He needed both hands to cut down trees and split wood, and his arms free to carry the wood home. He couldn't keep the bird with him, but it seemed cruel to bring the bird back to life only to return it to the fate of an icy death. He didn't know what to next.

Just then, he noticed a herd of cattle passing by just a short distance away. This gave the woodsman an idea. He walked toward the cattle until he found their fresh calling cards on the path, steaming in the frigid air. He searched until he found the largest and warmest cow-pie he could and then he nestled the little bird into it. Satisfied that he had saved the bird's life, he went back to the forest, chopped wood and headed home.

In the meantime, the little bird began to notice his new surroundings—a fertile and organic environment, to be sure, but a bit fragrant and not the most pleasant place he had ever found himself. He was warm and alive, but he began to feel sorry for himself; so sorry that he threw back his head and began to sing his complaints for all the world to hear. He sang so loudly and so clearly, that a

wolf passing nearby heard the singing and followed the sound back to the source, where he spotted the little bird, plucked it out of the cowpie and ate it for lunch.

That's the whole story. It's a Russian story, not a happy story. And like all good Russian stories it has not one moral but three: The first moral is that the one who gets you into a less-than-pleasant situation is not necessarily your enemy. The second moral is that the one who gets you out of it is not necessarily your friend. And the third moral is that when you find yourself in unfamiliar surroundings that smell a little funky, be very mindful about who is around when you sing about it.

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So. James and John. Still utterly unclear about what it might mean to sit at the side of Jesus in his glory, they say: "We are able." Jesus understands that his glory involves going to the cross and has now tried three times to explain this to the disciples. And yet these two come to Jesus seeking safety in the form of institutional status. Perhaps they had no interest in being stuck up to their necks in the muck of creating an alternative to the Empire. Or perhaps they thought that positional authority inside a new power structure was the path to glory.

In any case, what Jesus offered was beyond their experience and must have been beyond their imagination. After Jesus describes his coming passion in Jerusalem a third time, first James and John, and then the other ten, fail to grasp what the times ahead will be like for Jesus and for the ambitions of the disciples. Jesus never abandons them, but continues to teach them about discipleship, even as they struggle. And despite their misunderstanding the disciples *do* continue to follow.

Last week, we heard Peter's misunderstanding of the suggestion that the disciples learn to be receptive of God's yearning for them. Today, James and John are not simply unreceptive, they have actually demanded that Jesus do for them what they ask of him.

James and John were two of Jesus' closest friends; two of the "inner three" disciples with Peter. When Jesus first called these sons of Zebedee, he referred to them as the "sons of thunder," presumably for the intensity of their dedication,

their impulsiveness and emotionality. Theirs is an intensity tempered and fueled by love. They have had privileged access to Jesus raising the dead and to the transfiguration, but these events have only confirmed their sense that Jesus will someday rule as an earthly king. They must imagine themselves fighting the Roman Empire at the side of their beloved friend and teacher.

Jesus warns them: “You do not know what you are asking.” Then he invites them to consider what participation in his glory will mean. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They reply, “We are able.”

They are so certain, are they not, these sons of thunder? “We *are* able.” There’s a boldness, a certain audacity, in the trust these two have in their abilities to act on their own behalf to secure their futures. Maybe it is just bluster, but while some of the other disciples struggle with fear or amazement, these two are all pumped up and eager to take on the world. Just like the tiny bird, they are about to be stuck up to their necks in a strange new reality and they are ready to sing loud and strong.

Now events become truly awesome. In a sense that James and John cannot yet comprehend, they are about to be correct: They *will be* able. What will make them able has almost nothing to do with their bravado. What will make them able relies on their following Jesus not into power struggles that lead to death, but into servanthood that leads to life abundant. The promise that Jesus makes to James and John, to the other ten and to the church—to you and to me—the promise that Jesus makes is not an inevitable prediction of crucifixion for us. God does not desire or ask for suffering and death. God desires and asks only for our obedience.

“The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” Jesus, the Son of Man, opens a new way for us by being an obedient servant of God, by willingly being *true to God* even unto death. That is the cup that *only* Jesus can drink. The disciples, and you and I, participate in his act by following Jesus into a context changed for all time by what Christ has done. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is our assurance that we do

not need to be driven by our fears or the search for security. Through the servanthood of Jesus Christ, God gives us a pattern to follow as faithful servants. Picking up our own cross of servanthood is an expression and acceptance of God's grace. And God's grace is how the church is able to embody an alternative to fear.

Our consent to God's grace working through us is at the heart of our baptismal vows. When we renew those vows on All Saints Day, we will say "we are able" in response to only one question: "Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?" Our answer to every other question will be "I will, *with God's help.*" We accept God's baptismal grace and the foretaste of eternal life and live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus did not give his life as "as a ransom for many" to buy us back from either God or the devil. Instead, Jesus paid himself out to rescue us from the illusion that we are nothing but self-sufficient, independent, self-made men and women. Jesus gave us his whole life and self-sacrificing death to challenge our assumptions about what is death-dealing and what is life-giving. Jesus gave us his life as the disorienting revelation of a strange new reality, which is this: Once we are able to give our self-sufficient selves away in service and love, we find ourselves living more fully than ever before. Once we are able to give our independent lives for others, we discover a liberating interdependence with all of creation in a world gripped by fear-filled self-preservation.

The pattern of Jesus' whole life runs contrary to fear-based perspectives on power, safety and success. James and John thought these came from positional authority, but Jesus pointed out a stunning alternative to them—and to us. Within every human heart is humility and arrogance, respect for others and a desire to outshine them, a yearning to serve and a craving to be served. Jesus showed us which of these to follow. We can choose to be slaves to the illusion that we achieve security by acquiring status and power for ourselves. Or we can liberate ourselves from our deceptions and choose to give of ourselves willingly, and in so doing, become more whole, joyfully participating in God's blossoming peace. With God's help, we are able.